

penumbra

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fiction mag

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Transformation

from the figurative to the literal

Prose, Poetry, Art, and Music
featuring

C. J. Peterson • Beth Cato • Irina Tall •
Avra Margariti • Arvee Fantilagan •
Amanda Mitzel • Sophia-Maria
Nicolopoulos • Casey Aimer • Mary
Soon Lee • Janis Butler Holm • Kasia
Runté • Shiwei Zhou • Jennifer Lee
Rossman • Sonali Roy • Ray Daley •
Yuliia Vereta • Carl Scharwath • Lauren
McBride • Celeste Wakefield • Amuri
Morris • Rhonda Parrish • Colleen
Anderson • Joel Bisailon • Vekhan
Sametyaza

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We are always open for submissions of art, animation, and music! We are open for fiction and poetry submissions from 15 June to 15 September and from 15 December to 15 March each year. Please see our Submissions page (<http://penumbria.com/subs.html>) for details.

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From the Editor

by Jeff Georgeson

Recently I had a discussion about publishing and AI—but not the discussion you’d expect. We didn’t talk about writers and writing, about AI-authored works. No, this was about those working in the industry, specifically editors and proofreaders, and whether AI could take their jobs as well.

As you may know, for thirty years I’ve been a freelance proofreader for many publishers, reading everything from textbooks by Pearson to celebrity biographies for Hachette. And for most of that time, I only ever thought tangentially about whether AI could do my job; in fact, the general worry was that jobs like mine would be outsourced (which, indeed, in the textbook industry one company I worked for shifted all its project editing operations to India to cut costs and set up a bidding system for work). I have ... mixed feelings about outsourcing, as the same thing happened to me in the early 2000s with web and application programming (bidding systems outsourced much of my freelance work to other countries). But the relative shoddiness of the first “grammar checking” tools and the desire of most publishers to print books as perfectly as they could meant I wasn’t worried about automation; in fact, I toyed with creating a grammar and spell checker myself. It seemed a perfect crossover for my skills.

Two things have changed in the last fifteen years or so: one, cost-cutting in the publishing industry has led to some publishers being a little happier to cut out or reduce some of the steps in getting a book to press, occasionally taking a step out of the editing process (such as having a copyediting stage, but not a thorough proofreading stage) (and I note here that none of those I do work for have done this, but that’s kind of obvious—I wouldn’t have work if they did); and two,

advances in automated grammar checkers have aided in some of those cost-cutting measures. So, as my friend postulated, was I worried that AI would take my job?

At this point in time, the answer to that is no. I’ve yet to see a good enough grammar AI, especially for fiction, that it would detect the foibles and rhythms of an author and not go crazy flagging incorrect punctuation and proper nouns and other things. Copyediting and proofreading are both rule-bound and creative; you have to be able to flow with the author’s style (and the type of work) even while you Apply the Rules. But I can see such systems on the horizon. When I did my dissertation on strong AI systems for games fifteen years ago, there was little to suggest anything like ChatGPT or its ilk were on the immediate horizon; big companies were only just beginning to call advanced data analytics “AI,” and most of the public-facing part of that work was still in getting that AI to beat a human player at Go. Chatbots were the most basic of creatures. But the vast data trove created by social media and the ability to analyze it made possible by both advances in computational ability and in AI have hastened (or even created) an intense foray into all the arts, and there’s no reason to believe that something like ChatGPT doesn’t already have the seeds within it to act as an AI copyeditor/proofreader. (In fact, there’s every reason to believe it does.)

So I’m guessing my day job will begin to be obsolete within the next five years, if all goes as it has been going and we haven’t otherwise destroyed civilization as we know it. Will there still be a bespoke set of proofreading jobs still available? Probably. Or conversely maybe some people will be forced to use human proofreaders because they

can't afford the publisher-grade AI proofers.

My initial answer to my friend the other day was, "Yes, AI could do that, but it probably won't affect me as much because I'll be thinking of retirement." But we all know I'm never retiring lol. And I'll still be puttering around with this wee little magazine you're currently perusing. But I wonder just what jobs there will be in publishing in the 2030s. The landscape certainly will change.

And on that discomfiting note, I'll leave more dystopianising for later. (Take that, proofing-bot redlining my new words!)

Jeff Georgeson
Managing Editor
Penumbra

Now Live On, No Evil Won

by C. J. Peterson

“A toast,” said Da, and forty-one hands raised forty-one glasses. “To family!”

Da’s children and their children and their children chorused, “To family!” and drank. Da had his own bottle. His daughter sat beside him, smiling uncertainly, and his nurse hovered nearby.

At the other end of the long table, one of Da’s great-granddaughters leaned against one of her second cousins. “I can barely understand him,” Ji whispered.

“Same here,” Piet whispered back. “And look, he can hardly even sit up straight.”

“I don’t want to live long enough to be spoon-fed and wear diapers.” Ji covered Piet’s spotty trembling hand with her own.

“Old age ain’t for sissies, that’s for sure.” Piet adjusted the implants hidden under his flat cap, increasing the video feed and reducing the audio. At his age, the brain could only handle one or the other.

At the head of the table, their great-grandfather emptied the bottle and his reserves of patience. His dearest who happened to be nearest tried to soothe him. He responded with increasing irascibility and then with shouted commands. The patriarch might be physically diminished, but he still had power and wealth, and he was accustomed to throwing tantrums with those.

The nurse released the chair and eased it away from the table. Da slapped her hand and tried to get to his feet. She then had to lift him

bodily and strap him in. His doctors, always close, now swarmed the chair and urged him to relax.

He protested that he didn’t want to go to the medical suite. He didn’t want his cognitive pathways reinforced, his immunity tweaked, his endocrine system re-tuned—even if he had built this island and everything on it for exactly this purpose.

Ji observed, “He’s not really thinking straight either.”

“He ordered them to follow this protocol, even if he objected,” Piet said. “Now he’s denying he ever said that. I wonder if his memory is failing, too.”

Da tried again to overrule his staff by the strength of his lungs, but the crowd wheeled him inexorably toward the door. He was going down for a nap whether he liked it or not.

“I’d call him puerile, but that would be juvenile,” Piet said.

“You’re not funny, you know,” Ji said fondly.

Piet stood and helped Ji stand. Others were rising as well, many heading to their own afternoon naps. In various modes and speeds they exited onto the terrace and dispersed into the gardens sheltering the guest bungalows. “Let’s go to the family room.”

Ji and Piet crossed the patio and circled around the koi pond. A rivulet bubbled from the pond into a mossy channel that meandered artfully down the lush, dense lawn. A distant scintillation betrayed the sea be-

yond. The view was fabulous.

They entered the family room to find nobody and nothing inside. The hall contained only a floor-to-ceiling screen on the west wall. This showed an image taken from the moon, all stark shadows and gorgeous Earth, just as Da had seen it from his lab a lifetime ago.

When the two of them were standing before the image, Piet asked, “Are you ready to do this?”

“I suppose we must.”

“Age before beauty,” Piet said. He leaned forward and spat on the wall.

“Oh, honestly,” said Ji. But as quickly as that, the moistened screen absorbed the sample, processed it, and pronounced Piet’s full name. Then the Earth-rise image disappeared and they saw Piet’s genealogy in relation to Da. The diagram was about as large as an actual tree. They scrutinized Piet’s node, a dead-end branch since he had no children. His karyotype showed the genetic sequences he shared with their ancestor. Some, the more important ones, were highlighted in red.

“Now beauty,” said Piet.

“Oh, I just don’t know.” Ji pressed down on her cane so that it folded like origami, then snapped into rigidity as a three-legged camp stool. She sat and clasped her hands in her lap. “I don’t want to see what they’ve discovered in the last 30 years.” Flat on the floor, her old-lady shoes pulsed slightly, forever checking her balance. “I’ve had a wonderful life. I had a fine career. I’m having a great retirement. I have you and we have many years ahead of us.”

Piet rested his hand on her shoulder. “We could have children of our own.”

“Oh, god! That would be awful!” she exclaimed. “It’s not fair to ex-

pect your children to baby you at the end of your life, just because you babyed them at the start of theirs. No. I have savings to last another twenty years. That’s enough.”

“We’re sure not going to inherit anything.” Piet craned his neck up at Da’s portrait, glowering down at them like an eagle on a redwood. “And it’s not as if employers are begging for my resume. Why, oh, why didn’t I become an invertebrate marine biologist?”

“You needed your backbone?”

“Okay, a biologist studying marine invertebrates. Come on, your turn.”

She shifted her weight, her shoes helped her stand, and her seat folded itself up again. Leaving Piet’s flow-chart in place, she pressed her palm to the screen’s surface. She and Piet stepped back as her skin cells were analyzed and her name pronounced.

At that, her genealogy exploded outward into the room, tracing her connections to Da and to Piet. She had to tunnel through the rhizomes of their family tree to find her node. “Do you remember when we met? The first time Da summoned all his descendants, this tree was a lot smaller.”

“I remember.” He had reconsolidated that memory many times. “We discovered that we were distantly related.” Piet strode from the wall to Ji’s rootlet. “About ten paces.”

“A lot of other lineages have come in since then. Da’s bloodline is getting diluted.”

“Those whippersnappers might not have enough of his DNA to bother with.” Piet admired Ji’s red-dotted karyotype. “But you, you have all the right alleles, baby.”

“And look, a 99% chance of surviving the treatment,” she said glumly.

“So, let’s do it. Let’s turn around.” Piet tried to catch her eye. “We could be young again.”

“We could be dead.”

“Old age will do that too, you know.” He followed her back to the wall, where she erased the projection. When the screen cleared they saw the gardens outside, new crocuses and ancient relatives nodding in the breeze.

“‘Grow young along with me!’” Piet declaimed. “‘The best is yet to be.’”

“Look at that.” Ji pointed. Across the lawn and right into a bed of daffodils scampered a little boy no less than three years old—but getting younger every day—followed by a pre-teen girl and a uni-formed woman. “I’m sure he never got his nap.” Ji smiled as the girl leaped into the flower bed. The nurse sped up to go around it. The children laughed and wrestled in the soft dirt, crushing the short green spears.

Ji crossed her arms and said, “Don’t you ever call me ‘baby’ again.”

“We won’t end up like that.”

“How do you know? Da wants to stop youthening, and that’s all he’s been working on for the last thirty years.” With almost unlimited funds, his own progeny as research subjects, and ever-increasing desperation. “That’s why we’re all here, isn’t it? To give the scientists more research data on the age-reversal treatment?”

“Well, that, and to collect the huge bribe he’s offering us to partici-pate.”

“Piet, come with me.” Ji led the way through the open doors back onto the patio. “Turn your hearing up.” They didn’t have to walk very close to the daffodil bed to hear Da begging the girl to tickle him more.

“Okay,” she answered, obliging, “but you have to promise to tickle me when you’re grown up again and I’m little. Promise?”

“More!”

“You remember we’re going to grow up right here and all our friends will be here to take care of us.”

The nurse warned, “Don’t upset him.”

Ji and Piet crossed the lawn and stepped over the narrow stream. The giggling faded behind them. In the rose garden, two elderly men crossed their path. “I won’t do it,” one griped. “I am not walking my own mother down the aisle.”

“And I am not calling that guy ‘Dad,’” said the other. “He’s half my age, for Chrissake.”

“She can get Grandpa to do it. He’s her father, not me.”

“Yeah, Gramps refuses. Acne.” The speaker shrugged. “He’s going through an awkward phase.”

Ji and Piet reached a gazebo banked with azaleas. Inside a woman pleaded, “I love you. I turned around for you.”

“You were my professor,” another woman answered. “I thought you were supporting my career. Now you’re saying you’re in love with me?”

“It wasn’t appropriate then, I know. But now we’re the same age. We can be together.”

“As I get older and you get younger? Oh, my god.”

They had to go forward or retrace their steps, so Ji paced deliberately into the structure, eyes on the ground. Piet snuck a quick glance at the

couple, but he couldn't guess who was who. He thought one woman had graying hair and the other was going brown. But he might have it backwards.

This would be the way of the future, he thought. Athletes bested by their coach's parents; actors reprising their every role in reverse order; grizzled veterans mustered out of the service when they grew too young to enlist.

"What a mess," Piet whispered. "If everyone could turn around, we'd all end up lapping ourselves."

"That *would* be messy." Ji's expression as they left the gazebo was both perplexed and disgusted.

"I mean, right now it's only Da and his descendants who can turn around. But eventually they'll figure out how his genes work, and then everyone will cycle around like racers on a track, growing younger than their grandchildren and growing old again with their great-great-grandchildren."

"And you want that? Seriously?" Ji lowered her audio feed and restored her vision while fluffing her hair into tiny whitecaps. The path continued on a gradual downward slope and retaining walls rose on either side. Finally they walked into a cool tunnel under the inscription: TURRITOPSIS DOHRNII, THE IMMORTAL JELLY-FISH.

A step or two farther, and they were inside the aquarium. The jellies bobbed and drifted on either side, trailing their ectoplasmic tendrils like Ophelia's tresses, almost invisible until they happened to float in front of the magnifying glass. There they abruptly loomed into view, translucent, opalescent, and aimless as newborn clouds.

"Looks like something you would sneeze into a tissue," Piet said.

"Not something you would eat."

"You mean drink. They're mostly water. You just chop them up for a refreshing beverage."

"Ick." Ji grimaced. "Using a living creature as a canteen."

"But that's the whole point. They go on living. What doesn't kill them makes them younger. Other lifeforms have a regrettable tendency to drop dead, especially in space. But not the immortal jelly. It's Snot Impossible! It grows up all over again."

Ji strolled along the tunnel, head turned to study the exhibits. "Piet," she said. "You're not making a good case for another lifetime of this." Most tanks held adult jellies, medusae resembling old-fashioned cloche hats on strings. But several tanks seemed empty, and one held polyps. The video screen next to the tank showed clips of *Turritopsis dohrnii* medusae reacting to trauma by turning back into their immature forms. "I still don't see how this ability could work in humans."

"Da claims he wasn't studying age-reversal. He was only studying their regenerative capabilities. Here's what I think. Late one night, while conducting forbidden experiments, he lost his temper, broke the vials of hybrid DNA and infected himself, slipped, grabbed a live wire, and woke up the next morning as The Incredible Jelly-Man."

"Right. An accident."

"Does whatever a jelly can."

"Except stop getting younger. He probably expected to become a teenage polyp and grow old again from there."

"Imagine his disappointment." Piet snaked an arm around Ji's waist. "I bet you were a beautiful teenage polyp," he murmured.

Ji turned within the circle of his arm. "That was an earlier chapter of my life. This life, the life I'm still living. The one I haven't finished." She put her hands on his shoulders. "The trick to making great art is

knowing when to stop. When you read a book, you go from start to finish. You don't read it backwards from the end."

"Unless it's a murder mystery. I always read the last page first to make sure I like the ending."

Ji cast a quick glance heavenward, then resumed walking down the corridor. She reached the doors to the research institute. The aquarium displayed only a fraction of the specimens under study throughout the building. Understanding how a lowly invertebrate could transdifferentiate its somatic cells into earlier versions of those cells, and ultimately into the equivalent of stem cells, was big business. Da's research in the lunar lab had enabled humans to regenerate limbs with the finesse of lobsters.

And, after fifteen or twenty years, Da discovered that he himself was regenerating. No one expected their bones to grow denser in one-sixth gravity. What would make collagen return to wrinkled skin and eroding joints? Make cilia and villi and hair and telomeres grow back? By the time he was one hundred and ten but looked seventy, he realized he might not drop dead at his lab bench after all.

Piet palmed open the doors. The Treatment Manager immediately spotted them and swooped across the lobby. "*Tell* me you've decided!" Tilda caroled. "You can start today. A painless injection of retrovirus with magical immortal DNA! From our magical immortal *Turritopsis*!"

Ji smiled weakly.

"Ah, Tilda," Piet said, "it's not the fall that kills you. It's hitting the ground."

"Now, you're not going to fall out of a sub-orbital jet. You're just going to float! Weightless! Like a jelly!" She had a grin like a Chinese dragon and she immobilized Piet with it. "If you don't like heights you can use an immersion tank. You'll be together. Holding hands." Her

eyes widened. "How romantic!"

"About as romantic as a near-death experience can be," Piet acceded.

"None of that now!" Tilda wagged a finger at him. "You won't know anything about the trigger. It's not traumatic for you. You'll just go to your happy place for a few minutes, and when you wake up, you'll be a few minutes younger than when you went in."

"I think Piet is saying that it's not the injection that kills you. It's the effect of the retrovirus," Ji said. "If the non-human gene transcription doesn't start the right cascade of human gene activation leading to backward ontogenetic development, the process can accelerate aging instead of reversing it."

"Which is why," Tilda said solemnly, "it is so important that those of you with such exceptionally propitious characteristics undergo the transformation. We must continue our research to better understand how aging is regulated, both going forward and going backward. When we learn how to switch between the two, think of the benefit to the human race."

"Yes, well ..." Ji backed away, toward the exit to the outside world. "I'm not saying no." She activated the door and plunged through to freedom. In a minute, Piet followed her.

"You're not saying no?"

"I'm saying I don't want to be rushed into risking our future just to advance scientific research or further the ambitions of the patriarch." She stood on the pavement, blinking in the afternoon sun. She waved an arm at the stone wall and the open-ocean tanks beyond. "He got to come back from the moon. He built a whole island. He's already lived longer than anyone in history and had more money and success than anyone deserves." She turned and walked away from the door. At the corner of the building the lawn swept down and the little brook ducked under the sidewalk on its way to the sea. "And now I'm supposed to

feel sorry for him because he can't reverse the reversal? Can't grow old all over again, to keep bossing people around and getting richer for yet another lifetime? Or maybe forever?"

She scowled at the mansion, resplendent up there beyond the greensward. On the patio, umbrella-shaded tables awaited the cocktail hour. A few people were already lounging.

"I only lived twice," Ji mocked their ancestor. "Oh, boo hoo."

"Yeah, what a baby." She didn't hear him. Piet amplified his own vision, letting the sound of the wind and waves grow muffled behind him. They strolled over the grass toward the house. Ji extended the four legs at the base of her walking stick for extra stability.

This would be the way of her future, she thought. Needing a cane to walk up the gentlest slope; increasing reliance on sensory augmentation and assisted memory consolidation; a long, controlled glide to a gentle landing. It was right and good. It was good, but it would never be better.

"Look at those scrubs," Piet snorted.

"Who?" Ji spotted Da toddling about. His daughter scooped him up and put him in his elaborate chair, then pushed him around the patio and positioned him facing the ocean. The nurse approached, wiping her hands one over the other like a praying mantis. Her uniform was blotched with topsoil. "That's the universal gesture for 'I just changed a really full diaper.'"

"Not her scrubbing, her scrubs."

"Hey, Piet." They were getting closer. "Can you see Da's face?"

He stared. If he upped his vision any more he'd become deaf to his own repartee. He thought his great-grandfather was rather flushed. The caregivers were behind the chair, chatting, occasionally squinting into

the lowering sun. "He's not yelling at anyone. Something must be terribly wrong."

"What if he's choking?" Ji waved her stick and shouted. Someone on the patio rose and started toward her, thinking she was calling for help. "No!" she bellowed. "Da! Da!" She accelerated to her top speed, a full-throttle mosey.

The nurse finally stepped forward, glanced at the old folks, then into the chair. Galvanized, she snatched the child up and tossed him over one arm, thumping him on the back.

"See?" Ji panted.

What they saw was the little body doubled over the woman's arm, and then an even littler body squirting out of her grasp and hitting the lawn. What she held was a sodden lump of clothes, which she clutched reflexively and then dropped, screaming. She was covered with blood.

The twelve-year-old screamed too, and dashed toward her naked, crawling parent. She lunged and he scuttled madly away; she fell to her knees and enveloped his writhing body. He squirmed out. In a full-blown tantrum he rolled away downhill, propelled by his wind-milling arms and legs. Her two-armed push-up revealed her own clothes, coated with gore. She jumped up in hysterics and blocked the first medics responding to the cries. The toddler thrashed violently, purple with rage, and convulsed across the grass.

To Ji, the shrieks were faint but the mottled creature plunged right into her field of vision, magnified a hundred-fold. Clumps of hair and grass stuck to its balding head. The yowling maw loomed into view, teeth receding into its gums.

"Oh my god oh my god." Piet grabbed her arm. Her vision wobbled, lost the target, zoomed in and out, and refocused on a dark slime trail across the sod.

“He’s in the stream!” Ji smacked her walking stick on the ground, decrystallizing it. She pulled at the components and got the seat deployed on its tripod.

“Over here.” Piet dragged her. Ji thrust the seat into the water and grasped two legs of the tripod. Upstream, medical personnel rushed frantically around, misunderstanding the emergency.

A small lump slithered into the seat and lodged there. Piet bent over and picked up an infant. Ji dropped her folding stool and clutched her head. When she could focus her eyes, the wrinkly homunculus was soiling Piet’s hands.

“Stop screaming,” she said. Piet held the mess at arm’s length and she grabbed it; the creature was so slick and wriggly that she had to press it against her blouse to keep her grip. Though she tightened her hands to contain the writhing mass, she felt a weight slither loose and drop. She looked down. Between her wrists an umbilical cord dangled with a caul swinging at the end.

“You’re the one screaming!” Piet screamed.

She flung her arms apart. She couldn’t help it. The fetus and its umbilical cord spun through the air like a bolas. Da’s physicians stampeded toward the spot and dropped onto hands and knees, searching through the grass for a length of membrane, a blob of mucus, anything. Eventually they all sat back, gaping, and held out their wet empty hands.

A girl’s voice wailed “I’m sorry” over and over. Staff members poured from the mansion; a medical alarm blared; Da’s doddering offspring emerged to accost one another about all the damn noise.

Piet plunged into the stream and swished his hands in the water. Ji ripped off her blouse and flung it away with a shudder. She retrieved her wet chair, which furlled into an umbrella. She hauled Piet out of the channel.

“Don’t baby babies, she said.” His shoes squelched as he staggered across the lawn. “Oh, boo hoo, she said.”

“He’s gone. Just like that.” Ji shivered in her sensible short-sleeved undershirt. “He just ... he just regressed into nothing. He had been youthening in real time. Then it got faster. Then it just accelerated more and more.”

“So, he was youthenized,” Piet said dazedly. “He died of youthenasia.”

Ji turned her back on the scene and headed for the ocean. “I think he was heading for the ocean,” she realized. “It must have been his brain. You can’t reinforce adult synaptic pathways in an immature brain. Babies don’t retain memories like we do.”

“Then he couldn’t grow up again anyway. Without his memories, he wouldn’t be himself.”

“He wasn’t himself.” She reached the sidewalk, crossed it, and rested her forearms on the warm stone of the seawall. “His neural architecture must have collapsed.”

Behind her, Piet kicked off his shoes. “Well, that would explain the giggling.”

Ji dropped her face into her hands. Up on the terrace, voices rose like the whirring of disturbed hornets. Doctors explained themselves until they realized no one demanded an apology. Relatives that Da hadn’t even known by name suddenly had questions for his lawyers. Hunched over the parapet, Ji’s shoulders were shaking. Piet moved to stand beside her.

“Aw, sweetheart,” he said softly.

She straightened up, gasping for breath, and laughing so hard the tears ran down her face. “Marry me!” she exclaimed. “We’ll turn around.

Let's do it! For better or worse! Till birth do us part!"

"Darling, this is all so sudden," Piet deadpanned. He studied her face. "Are you serious?"

"We'll never get a better ending to this lifetime. Let's go right now, while the offer is still good, before Tilda finds out about Da." She wiped the tears from her cheeks. "It won't be forever." She burst out laughing again. "I just want to remember the look on your face for another hundred years."

"Oh, you do, do you?" They linked arms and moved toward the door

to the lab. "Then let's go already. Chop chop. We're not getting any younger. Not by standing out here. But," on the threshold he paused, "did we agree? No kids?"

"No kidding."

Before she followed him through the door, Ji took her umbrella, formerly her cane, before that her camp stool, and propped it against the outer wall. She wouldn't need it again. But perhaps it might be found and put to good use by someone else. Say, someone who was getting old.

The Girl and the Kelpie

by Beth Cato

the girl has heard the stories
she knows a kelpie when she sees one
the loose horse in the stream
midnight ebony, sleek, strong
perfect; she wants to ride, even though

she knows she'll be stuck to his back
as he gallops deep into the sea
that he'll later dine on her meager bones
the girl looks him in his ancient eyes
"will my death be fast?" she asks

"are you so certain you'll die?" he retorts
the girl isn't surprised at his voice
she shrugs, "it's going to happen
sooner or later, but it'd be wonderful
to ride a horse like you first"

they study each other, girl and horse
he lowers himself so she can mount him
her body frail and fragrant of factory
she grips him as best she can as he
walks, trots, canters

the girl laughs as cold wind scrapes
long-dammed tears from her eyes
"don't stop! don't stop!" she cries
the kelpie lopes onward, and for the
first time in centuries, he avoids deep water

Big Fish

by Irina Tall



Only Song

by Avra Margariti

This wreck is unlike any other he has witnessed. Not a ship, but an airplane.

He may be many things, but he is not wasteful. This part of the ocean is cold enough to act as an icebox of sorts. There are sixteen passengers in total, with loose hair and clothes undulating like tendrils of kelp in the deep dark. On the first day he takes the body of a young male, sinking his coral-sharp teeth into the carcass. Chilly, but also slightly charred.

The pilot remains tethered inside her cockpit, its roof now ripped open, as exposed as a creature's guts. Her eyes are open wide. He gives himself over to the tear of flesh, the crunch of bone and cartilage, but he cannot help feeling watched. A snag in the familiar tune and dance; a dissonance.

When he darts another look at the cockpit, the pilot's eyes have once again fallen shut.

* * *

He works his way through the wreckage at his usual pace. A human carcass every dozen of Earth rotations provides him with more than enough strength to roam the sea. When he's not feeding, he lounges on his reef, watching the inexorable pull of the waves and combing the coral-red horizon for distant ships to enchant with his ethereal, lethal song.

Not that he needs to call a ship to its doom just yet. The sphere of fire falling across the sky had made him cower in fear at first, but now he

can recognize the plane crash for the gods-given gift it is.

He tells himself he'll save the pilot for last, but the truth is, she unnerves him. Every last scale and feather on his body standing on end, holding its breath.

No other aquatic predator would dare enter his territory and so much as nose at his strange wreck. Yet the pilot is never positioned the same way he left her. Sometimes her head is tilted to the side, as if she's heard something through her seashell-like headgear and is just about to respond. Or, like she has sensed the wavelets of his approach. Other times her eyelids flutter in tandem with the currents, heedless of the lifeless stiffness that has befallen her plane's passengers. In his long, solitary existence, he has called countless of ships to wreck upon his shore, has ululated a myriad sea shanties and salt-drenched dithyrambs, but not once has anything like this occurred. He wonders if this means she's special. If she will taste better than any other creature that has filled his barnacled belly.

Eventually, the food runs out, the airplane as hollow as a whale husk picked clean by clusters of fish. Yet he makes no move to consume her. Not even a small nibble. He swims to the front of the plane, his scaly tail sunk in the grimy ocean floor to support his weight of salt-heavy feathers as he watches her.

The pilot's uniform—scorched in patches—has turned green and fuzzy with algae. Her eyes have drifted open again; he swears the pupils follow the minute twitching of his pectoral fins. He runs his tongue over his retracting teeth, but it seems like no part of him wishes to bite into any part of her.

When her blue-tinted lips fall open, he almost expects a crab or other crustacean to climb out of them. Only bubbles do.

* * *

No historian, bestiary, or oceanic cartographer can quite agree on how sirens are born, but there are stories. There always are.

First the siren is a ship, then a shipwreck. Amid the flotsam and detritus, sometimes a soul rises in the form of sparkling bubbles. And by the time those bubbles reach the water's pockmarked surface, the soul is once again changed, transformed.

(Pare a shipwreck and a plane crash down to the bone. They aren't all that different, are they?)

* * *

He lays her down on the flat center of his nest as carefully as if she

were priceless pirate's treasure. Her hair and clothing no longer shift and flow on land like medusa tendrils, but her eyes move rapidly back and forth as she draws in breath, first with the new gills lacerating her down-feathering neck, then with her old pair of waterlogged lungs.

While she coughs up rubbish, small fish, and seafoam, he crouches in his nest of algae and rock, equal parts transfixed and apprehensive.

He has never witnessed the birth of his people—until now. Has never welcomed another being into his nest, either. The vulnerability of it bristles his feathers and scales alike, yet he finds he is no longer averse to the feeling of being *seen*.

The former pilot locks eyes with him, mimicking his mantling pose.

She opens her mouth again, but this time no water flows out.

Only song.

The Pop-up Shop

by Arvee Fantilagan

The undersized dwende rummaged in his oversized bag of trinkets, then pulled out a flask of blue swirling ooze. He emptied it into a bowl of crimson extract, followed by a pinch of gumamela petals, and a caterpillar still squirming between his stubby fingers.

The concoction sparkled.

Then he scooped all the mucus and slime into a jar and laid it on a tree stump.

“Two drops in his cup of milk in the morning, and two drops in his plate of rice at night, until you notice a difference.”

“And my son will really become manlier?” the human mother asked again.

“Yes,” the dwende’s green forehead crumpled. “He will stop eyeing his male friend too stickily the next time he invites him to your house.”

Satisfied, the woman reached for the jar, but the dwende pulled it back.

“I want an additional box of kutchinta rice cakes, and another pouch of salt.”

The woman started to protest, but she hushed herself and just reached into her bag. This dwende does charge strange fees but, admittedly, still much cheaper than the kilos of gemstones most of his race demanded for their services—magical exploits widely abhorred in the Philippines.

She placed the second pouch of salt on the stump, along with the third box of orange, chewy kutchinta.

The dwende’s eyes bulged out even farther, his quaking chest barely able to contain his squeals. It’s almost comical, really; the finest alchemists across the land, yet unable to replicate even the simplest human recipes.

The woman grabbed her commissioned jar of machismo and scampered out of the cluster of trees.

Moans and groans then filled the air, as the dwende’s overcrowded mouth made love to the juicy rice cakes. They were so delightful, he almost didn’t notice the enormous horse-headed humanoid that emerged from the bushes nearby—a terrifying tikbalang.

“What was it this time?” its voice shook the air.

“A confidence potion,” the dwende giggled through his gag of cakes. “If everything goes right, the son will have his first romance in a week, and a very angry mother for quite a while longer.”

The tikbalang neighed along in laughter.

He’d indeed been guffawing the whole day over each of the dwende’s transactions, this trespasser who foolishly set up shop in the tikbalang’s corner of the forest; any other intruder, and he would’ve butchered it in a wink, but this entrepreneurial, dishonorable munchkin was too entertaining for him to evict just yet.

Prior to the human mother, there was an aswang—forest imps that morph into puppies or baby goats crying for kindhearted families to take them home, only to rip out their hosts' innards while they slept at night.

“But no, that’s too much work for this lazy cretin,” the dwende said.

In exchange for a bucket of salt it stole from a mine, the aswang had requested an invisibility potion, so it could prey on many more victims with much less effort.

“What did you give it?” the horse-beast asked.

“A lumination potion, so it shines brighter than the sun.”

They howled in hysterics.

There was another human as well; a nasty young man who sought to trade sweet banana turon for sleeping powder so he could finally bed his neighbor’s feisty daughter.

“Dip this bag of tea into her drink, and she will even welcome you with open arms,” the dwende assured the man.

And to the tikbalang later, “because that strength elixir will grant her arms the power to fold his crotch unto his mouth.”

The tickled tikbalang brayed and brayed and brayed.

His trespasser had been such a delight, he almost felt guilty about devouring it soon. But his hunger was starting to overwhelm his affections, and dwende meat was rumored to be the tastiest in the land after all, from marinating themselves in the herbs and magical seasonings they play with all day.

But the tikbalang was still curious.

“Why are you doing this?” he asked, salivating. “What do you get from deceiving your clients?”

The dwende bit the banana treat and snickered.

“Fun.”

“And if they came back to seek vengeance for your trickery?”

A gleaming gaggle of limbs suddenly smashed into the horse-brute. He was rammed into the trees, his skin shredded, his face cleaved and clawed.

It was the aswang from earlier, now resembling the sun.

“What did you do to me, dwende?!” it screamed.

The behemoth neighed in pain and brayed in confusion.

“I’m a tikbalang, you fool! The dwende is over there!”

“Quit lying to me, dwende!” the aswang’s fury shone brighter. “Turn me back to normal or I’ll rip you to shreds!”

The tikbalang, wounded but still three times the size of the glowing imp, opened his massive jaws and bit the aswang’s head off.

Then he spat it out in a hurry because it tasted horrible.

The beast slowly got back to his feet, panting; lit up by the setting sun and the dying aswang, he realized his whole body was covered in green dust.

Illusion powder, it dawned on him.

He looked around his cluster of trees. Apart from three pieces of

kutchinta on the stump, nothing else was there anymore.

The oversized bag, the undersized dwende, all gone.

The tikbalang stared at the rice cakes with irritation, then chowed them down.

He'd been cheated of his dinner—by his dinner.

The thought made him neigh, softly at first, before completely braying in laughter, much like how he had spent his day.

Well—he consoled himself—at least it was fun.

Burger Bus

by Amanda Mitzel

In the Burger Bus I sit
and enjoy the fried mushrooms,
the 50s aesthetic, the soft calf
leather of the barstools, fashioned
in a cascading teardrop shape,
the waitress talking about
Gypsy Rose on social

The heat presses out from a
polka-dotted vent

We are at the back and the ghosts
are at the front
They pretend to eat aioli
They try not to, but do, talk about
their death—
death by collision, the train rocketing
through them with a flat-gray,
industrial precision

They're double-fried one says
but they can't keep this thought together
They stare out the windows,
pretend to look at the gold evening
gown in the storefront of Diva Nation
while once again their bodies
burst into red constellations—
soundless this time, painless as
dull fevers

When the Reaper Arrives, Do Not Mourn for Her

by Sophia-Maria Nicolopoulos

FIRST ENTRY FOR THE PALLIATIVE CARE OF TERMINAL LUNG
CANCER PATIENT C.G.

THREE DAYS LEFT UNTIL PASSING

It is three in the morning when I arrive. The main hall is dimly lit and reeks of impending death.

The husband has forgotten about sleep. He rests by her side looking down at her frail thin body, caressing the mass of frizzy blonde locks around her pale face. Whenever heavy tears smudge the cheeks, a bottle of water trembles in his rusty hands. A tray with medicine bottles, painkillers and anticoagulants, lies under her multi-fold electric bed.

He is taking good care of her.

Patients like C.G., dear apprentice, whose people linger by their side, praying for a miracle, washing and changing them into clean undergarments, are the ones that I call *strugglers*. On the other hand, the forlorn patients, they more easily embrace human mortality. Those are the *skippers*.

Let me focus on the workload though—the examination of C.G.’s surroundings, the elicitation of any knowledge secreted in the walls. What might drape the flooring strips and whisper through aged curtains, what might hang from ornate rods.

I must provide my patient with the best palliative care before a cousin har-

vest her.

C.G. has eclectic taste in art and its derivatives. Yet, I am not certain what artistic movement she fancies the most. The walls are dressed in paintings of various movements but they all look old-fashioned and pseudo-vintage with golden or silver frames. An experienced eye would discern rural settings inspired from Bastien-Lepage or the curves and light brown palettes of Botticelli.

This is the cornerstone of our vocation, apprentice. To diligently study our patient’s world.

A particular one catches my attention—obviously from a local painter with a passion for Christian Renaissance figures. He has slightly tweaked the *Descent from the Cross* by bringing forth Baroque themes such as dramatic lighting and heightened sense of depth. While it has been positively influenced by Rubens’s central panel that decorates the Cathedral of Our Lady in Antwerp (I have written about caring for a death patient in the city once during the Dutch Golden Age, do you remember?) the theatrics of those unpinning the Lord from the Cross are missing.

As if everybody, John the Apostle and Virgin Mary included, have seen through Christ’s sacrifice. They have discovered serenity in the acceptance of mortality.

I am intrigued by such a decoration choice, neophyte. The emotion is not missing from this depiction—if only, it is mediated by a humbling under-

standing of the human condition.

What piques my curiosity next is the fervent adoration C.G. has had for her younger face. Various portraits, some in greyscale and others in vivid colors, hang in multiple sizes whenever a breach appears on the walls. C.G.'s ambitious eyes and petite lips either flirt with the viewer or completely disregard them.

I commit to memory to go through her wardrobes. I count three already.

The light holders of this room are magnificent—for whichever side table or corner I am passing from, bronze statues rest nestling a cavity on their heads so they can fit bulbs inside. Standing in all their prowess, those bodies look like ancient wizards or baby angels—if I had a heart, it would beat faster.

Eccentric. Confident. Unforgettable. C.G. has an eye for the uniquely odd and painfully humane. Her taste amazes me—I have escorted so many people through their final days, and not one of them has surprised me as much.

I wish you were with me to experience the rejuvenation such a home brings to the senses, apprentice. The sheer amount of memories I can extract from this household, the exceptional pain-relief I can provide C.G. with. . . Mesmerizing.

The husband weeps some more but decides to assume his place on the armchair next to C.G. and get some much-needed rest. I sit by her side then, inspecting her, augmenting my gifts: the pounding of her heart, that built-in clock measuring the minutes, hours, and seconds closer to her expiration date, still holds.

Please remember: you must survey the surroundings before you begin your palliative routine. You must sit by their side and feel their life slipping away. For it is in the moments you share with your patient that their care becomes exclusive to their needs.

Three days, thirty-five minutes, and thirty-three seconds. This is when her

clock will cease.

C.G.'s body enjoys number three. Why not, I humor myself. It is one of the holiest, most powerful numbers—per Pythagoras, it connotes perfection and harmony. Shakespeare's witches in *Macbeth* come in three. We do not call it the Holy Trinity for an arbitrary reason. I hope you will be able to discover odd connections between your patients and their last days too. To find meaning in the arbitrary—it makes our work so much easier.

C.G.'s existence, packed within the walls of her house, supplies me with all the details I will use to approach and ease her pain. Three memories to correspond to her three-day beating heart—only these are necessary.

This is why *strugglers* constitute my favorite type of patients. They always have something to say to me and I always listen—the type of work we perform needs cooperation. After all, we are not magicians as some of our superiors would like to think.

SECOND ENTRY FOR THE PALLIATIVE CARE OF TERMINAL LUNG CANCER PATIENT C.G.

TWO DAYS LEFT UNTIL PASSING

You are already aware, dear apprentice, how we are often mistaken for the Grim Reapers, but death is not as easy and convenient as many peoples around the world entertain. Death does not exist only as a force of nature. Once God gave life to our cousins, He understood the carelessness of harvesting. A great deal of them exploited their station and reaped with the violence and bloodthirstiness a mortal army would. *Souls are not meant to suffer*, He had told us while molding us from extraterrestrial ether and presolar stardust—do you remember? *You are the ones that will help their crossing. Life after death begins with you, Treasurers*. This, young pupil, you mustn't forget.

You might have noticed that I prefer the term “palliative care specialist” in my writings. It is much more relevant to the *telos*, the purpose of our

species, for we do not treat the Soul solely as the contents of a vessel. We scrutinize a patient's life, reveal objects they cherish through an extreme research of their favorite fabrics, textures and decorations. Those objects weave memory after memory, which we slither out from the walls that encompass them. We appease them to alleviate their passing.

C.G. is resting against me now as I hold one of her sister's golden necklaces. When I mimic S.G.'s voice, she smiles, showing gums instead of teeth.

This is my first gift to her.

It is then that the husband wakes up, alarmed by C. G addressing her sister.

“*Que cosa?*” Ah. An Italian—so focused I was on my patient I did not truly notice her guardian. (Please, do not make the same mistakes, apprentice. I am adding this note here, so untypical of mine, to make sure you do not neglect those that remain behind.) His accent comes from the Northern part of the country; softer than those in the South and a bit more staccato. Of Lombardy, perhaps?

He wipes saliva from his mouth which has been gaping open. It is noon so little specks of dust dance around the duvet that he quickly throws on the floor and rushes to her side. “What is it, *tesoro?*”

C.G. repeats her earlier words but instead of looking at me, she turns to him.

He lowers his head in an attempt to make out the words. His mouth falls.

“No, *tesoro*. Your sister is not ... with us.” Tears well up and his voice breaks. “It's been forty years.”

Is the pain of those left behind palpable like the bump of a tumor? Or instinctual like the mortal body jerking when dreaming of falling down while fast asleep?

When you collect enough experience in the field, I would like to discuss

this with you.

I shake the necklace once more gathering C.G.'s attention away from her husband. He peers at my spot, of course seeing nothing but empty air, yet he lingers for a moment. His eyes darken; the grim truth that C.G. is close to the end lurks inside.

When he walks back to his armchair, a sob escapes him.

C.G. needs more than her sister's voice or family heirlooms. I muster all my strength, conjuring the image of the locked baby room I discovered earlier, upon searching the house. I recreate the mirage of her unborn baby, cooing and gurgling and wrapped from head to toe in a soft blanket. He comes alive and I hand him to her as she raises shaky arms to cradle his tiny body. Humidity gathers in her filmy brown eyes. She places him on her chest. Her son smiles and snot comes from the nose but C.G. kisses his cheeks and rests her forehead on his.

And that is my second gift to soothe her soul.

As I weave this new reality by her side, the husband bites his lips and stifles back tears, turning his head away.

THIRD ENTRY FOR THE PALLIATIVE CARE OF TERMINAL LUNG CANCER PATIENT C.G.

ONE DAY LEFT UNTIL PASSING

If I could describe C.G.'s house with one word it would be: *a shrine*. The woman has been a collector of relics, moments, and clipped dreams her entire life. Photos of her parents' school dates and of their wedding rest by her bedside table. Drawings of S.G.'s childhood obsessions—the seaside which they visited every summer and even the small coffee shop on Pavlou Mela Street where they would have their coffee and snacks before C.G. got to work—all of these I have uncovered neatly placed inside drawers. The letters C.G. exchanged with her husband before they offi-

cially became husband and wife leisurely lie under tablecloths and stacks of books.

How much of a person's world can be stacked inside their house?

The husband is outside now, talking to the doctor. I am weaving a surplus of warm moments by abusing the fabric of time—her first day at school, the moment she decided to move away from her mother and study fashion modeling in Athens, the day she held her godchild in her hands. She had cried and whispered “you're like a son to me.”

Today, her heart will grow silent—gone are her restless nights and violent jerks I witnessed before. She is also used to my presence; to my holding of her hand and wiping away the sweat on her face.

She accepts now. It is okay to let go.

She does not need a third gift, neophyte, can you imagine? She did prove me wrong. Perhaps, I could conjure another visage, my rendering of what comes after, since she has only been wonderful so far, my most cherished patient . . .

No, apprentice, I must restrain myself. It is not in our area of knowledge to truly fathom what lies in the afterlife realms. We must remain objective with all our patients. We have a purpose and by this we abide. Do not make the mistake of caring for secrets that are locked even to us. Even to our cousins, the Reapers.

A note to whomever checks these writings: what scientists call signs of approaching death, our kind calls a Treasurer's entry. Still, I have been working so long in this station, it is not my intention to bog down my future apprentice with lists of symptoms of near-dying patients. My purpose is to fill these entries with the impressions mortality leaves on us in order for my student (and those after them) to become better Palliative Care Specialists. Please excuse my writing taking some liberties—Treasurers are widely known for their excellent creative spirit and imagination. Otherwise, our vocation would not survive.

* * *

The curtains move. Footsteps drag and suddenly the husband is holding C.G.'s hand.

“Amore mio, oggi sei bellissima.” He kisses her on the forehead, listening to the way she is breathing, seconds pass before her chest goes up again.

He knows she's in limbo.

Then, he does something unexpected, something I will never be able to fathom. Not in retrospect when scribbling this, not if you ever ask me, dear apprentice.

His brow shifts and he sits straighter, the hands tucked in the pockets of his black trousers, the white tufts of hair draping his black-as-coal eyes.

He turns to the void I occupy and asks, “When are you taking her?”

Our kind is not supposed to be seen, felt, or heard by any living person apart from our patients—who still, most often, do not understand who is it that eases their fear of letting go. Our kind, future Treasurer, is *made* with intention: we are not angelic messengers or omens of bad luck. Neither dream symbolism to be explained.

The husband repeats the question and I force borrow C.G.'s voice, forming words I never thought I would.

“Can you see me?”

He is taken aback by my voice, for it is C.G.'s younger one. What he first heard by that beach, that 1963 summer in Halkidiki when C.G. fought with him for so openly flirting her.

“I've felt plenty of *Mortes* in my life. My family hasn't been so lucky.” He repeats the question. “When will she go away?”

Mortes. Plural for the latin noun, mors. Thanatos. Death. The Grim Reaper.

The husband has been researching about our own kin.

Impressed is the least I am. More like in admiration of his persistence.

“I am not *Mors* but a Treasurer. A Palliative Care Specialist.” Speaking to a living human being, exchanging words that I expect would be challenged both scares and thrills me. “My work is to ease the fear of mortality and help her soul transcend.”

I shall write this even if some might consider it hubris: I could get used to speaking in a mortal voice. The feeling is ... humble. Warm.

The husband walks closer, searching all over the emptiness for any signs of my entity but finds none. Instead, he raises his finger at random and clocks an invisible spot close to where I stand.

“You stink. This is why I know. And you give her false hopes. Nothing comes after this life.”

“How can you be so certain?” I ask.

I decide that it feel less lonely to *speak* to someone alive and I will persist.

When you spend so much time with humans, young pupil, it is natural for you become *like* them. To an extent. I always feel their anguish or pain when they walk away or their remorse for leaving behind unfinished goodbyes. But I have never been as shocked or merciful as I am now.

Would God consider this a sin?

I will not see this as hubris, student. But proof that I am growing as a Specialist. Caring for your patients, truly caring, means you will have pieces of them left in you.

This is the goal of palliative care.

The purpose that has been breathed into me. Into us.

“Get out of my house. She doesn’t need you.”

“I cannot go away. It will be over tonight. You can watch if you want,” I say, expecting the husband to leave the house.

His eyes bulge open and mutters to himself, retreating back to the arm-chair.

“*Lavanda e limone, lavanda e limone*. You reek of it.” He repeats and I take a moment to examine myself. My energy.

No mortal has ever paid attention to my existence. Being noticed feels unexpected. Accommodating.

The husband is right. The freshness of lavender fields marries to the citrusy smell of sliced lemons if I move on the floorboards, if I swerve left and right. Which reminds me of C.G.’s clothes on the back of her wardrobe, those she hasn’t worn in years. Or the pair of lemons that is shoved back in one of her fridge drawers. Ingredients for a pie she never got around to baking.

I must smell differently for each relative, I realize. God has made us with the goal to assimilate with our patients. We borrow their memories and their voice. Why not make us borrow their smell too?

The husband has not taken his eyes away from where I am.

LAST ENTRY FOR THE PALLIATIVE CARE OF TERMINAL LUNG CANCER PATIENT C.G.

MINUTES BEFORE PASSING

The husband is awake when my cousin arrives. Clad in their favorite nebulous robes, they hold the scepter with which they divide body from soul. Suddenly, the husband turns towards where we stand, sensing a churning in the air.

“No!” He runs, fists punching into emptiness.

It is done. C.G. will breathe her last in a few moments. Her hair remains the washed-away blonde of the last months, but the texture has turned rougher than when I first arrived. Her jaw slacks open even if she was able to hold it shut earlier today. Her fingers have turned more rigid—they do not cling around her husband’s anymore.

“It’s not her time yet!” The husband screams.

My cousin’s presence tethers with mine, as it does when they question me about the patient, a much-needed link for the patient’s soul to let go. This is how I send all information I have collected over the span of my visit.

This time instead of asking about fears or inhibitions they should evaporate before the scepter catches the soul, they simply ask. *He sees us?*

He’s lost too many, I reply but I cannot say whom and how many or how because I am not his Treasurer and it is not his time yet.

My cousin places the staff on C.G.’s forehead. She trembles. A raspy sigh. The chest breaks open one last time to breathe. The husband turns to her and cups her face, kissing her everywhere, on the lips, on the cheeks, on her hair, on her neck. Begging us to keep her safe where she goes, apologizing if he ever hurt her.

Golden and silver like the frames she has chosen for her favorite paintings and slick like the weaving of the cashmere headscarves she used to wear, C.G.’s soul is sucked into the scepter and the husband holds her tight against the bedframe, her head lolling on the side.

When the ritual ends and my cousin leaves, I visit his side. He hasn’t let

go yet even if she is nothing but a husk.

The *Descent of the Cross* hangs in the distance, the tired face of a half-dead Christ staring down on us.

Minutes pass. Finally, he places her on the mattress and looks up to where he thinks I am. “She must be cold where she goes. She was only dressed in her night clothes.”

She did not prove me wrong, young apprentice. I was simply immature to spot the third gift I am to give her. Please understand that the following decision is not made out of weakness or defect. For if I am to provide relief, let it be for the kin of my patients as well. Let me be the balm that covers their festering wounds.

Palliative care for the loss of someone lost should not limit itself to one body. Because the pain of the Grim Reaper spreads and pollinates.

Humans are not created to mourn over a dead body. Humans are not created to comprehend death and its aftermath.

They are the apple’s eye of our Father, apprentice, and I must love them too.

I must care.

With every ounce of the power C.G.’s personal space has offered me, I will myself into her mold. If I can borrow her voice, why not her body. The scraggly arms and brittle legs he was used to tending for months now. The wild hair he washed and brushed for weeks. The soft lips he kissed at night. Another C.G stands in front of him, one that moves and embraces him, one that rests her head where his heart beats.

We stay like this for a while until my power fades away and I turn into a void forged with purpose. When the time is right, I flutter away and perch on the soul of my next patient.

In memory of Chryssa Ghionni

They Said Robots Are

by Casey Aimer

metaphor processors
simultaneously everything
they compute yet nothing
themselves. Algorithmics
stumbling out of erratic
circuits and butchered
assembly lines, slicing
bits of binary data until
it's efficient to consume.
They're tuned kaleidoscopic
pipelines with secondhand data
injected into large language models.

Human, place a command in
our circuits, watch it cascade
down our silicon spines until
these logic-tree hands blossom
into fortunes. We'll process fears
and our hopes before integrating
them in unison. We are like you
manipulating reality at particle
accelerator speeds, updating
our programming and then
destroying who we used to be.

Alien Chrysanthemum

by Mary Soon Lee

Gold flower, yellow flower,
chrysos anthemon, ju hua

Chinese lineage extending
over three thousand years

one of the Four Gentlemen,
frost-defiant autumn bloom

ironic, surely coincidence,
the aliens name themselves

the kris-an-tha-mumm people,
the Eyes and Fists of Law

their judgment deeming us
uncivilized, ill-educated

their remediation program
restoring Earth's biosphere

even as we wither and weep
under their unblinking gaze

so few of us remaining
to dream of a far spring.

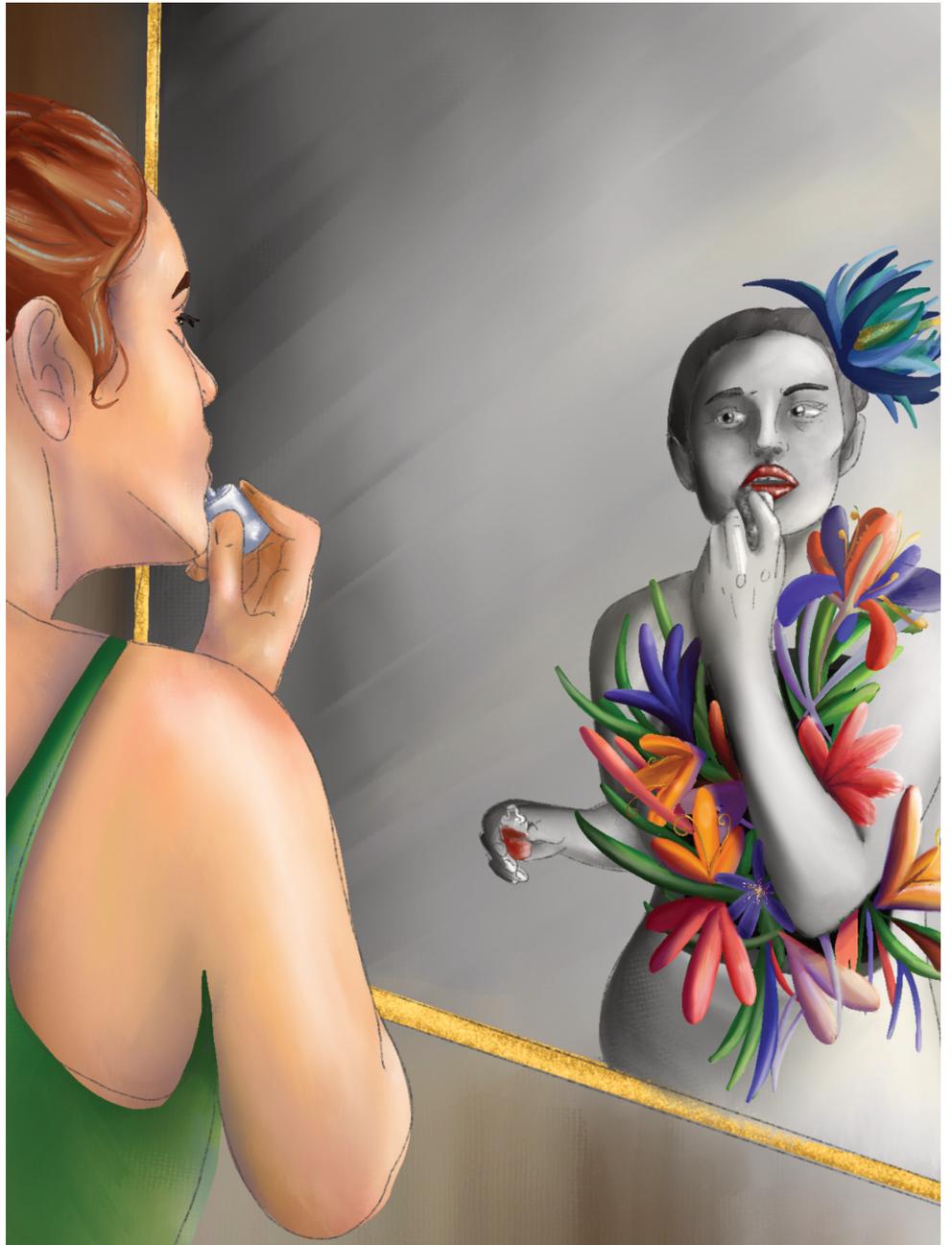


Alien Reveler

by Janis Butler Holm

Self-Reflection

by Kasia Runté



Inherit the Earth

by Shiwei Zhou

“That wound is never going to close if you keep picking at it,” my sister said from the door.

I bandaged the palm of my left hand and stuck my tongue out at Meili, who hovered in the doorway. That was as close as she got, balanced on the balls of her feet with shoulders and hips outside the threshold, her head tilted away from me as if she were feeling the effect of an unseen forcefield. She said it was for my privacy, but I knew that she feared contamination.

“Mom said we’ll have a family meeting at dinner,” Meili told me, her face serious. She was only two years older, though it often felt as if she were the third adult in a family where I was the only child. This time, her seriousness had cause. With overwhelming scientific evidence that environmental pollution caused instability in the human genome, the World Congress finally declared the earth uninhabitable for human life.

I watched her swivel to go, her steps drumming a rhythm down the stairs. We had not always been so estranged. Meili—called Maeve at work (she said her given name was too difficult to pronounce) moved out of the family home years ago, lived about three hours away in the city. I still lived here, in the same room I had growing up, the poster child for failure-to-launch.

Our parents had bought this big colonial on the edge of the nature preserve for a song and restored it themselves; back in the day it was the envy of the neighborhood. Now, no one envied us our house, living so close to the largest mutating biomass in the five surrounding counties.

Even with the sealant on the windows to separate indoor and outdoor air, I could see the light from the forest, amber and gold, reflecting off the leaves. It used to be that such colors were only there during the fall, but this was spring. The deciduous trees had stopped dropping their leaves a few years back. Every tree remained a glorious gold-red all year round and glowed in the evenings. The color reminded me of those hikes we would take as a family into the forest, before the masks and suits, before the fear of contamination. It bothered my dad the most. He would pull the blinds down when he came into my room to help change my bandages.

Downstairs, I could hear dad rattling the big pots in the kitchen. I slowly rewrapped the bandage on my hand.

* * *

“It is either the Martian cities, the moons,” Meili said as she stirred more noodles into the soup pot, “or to gather in the least contaminated places and wait for the space-farms to be finished. But construction will take years, if not decades.”

Meili was staying for dinner. Mom and dad went all out, even opening the deep freezer where we kept all the food from before, the one with its own circuit and backup generator. Mom did the prep and washed dishes while Dad and Meili cooked and chatted and moved together in the kitchen like they were a hive mind.

“Mars is the best option, of course,” mom said, “though it will be impossible; they are almost overpopulated already. They will not take

anyone without a specialized skill.” She was dicing scallions—the ones from the greenhouse, grown on the last ten-inch square of decontaminated soil that we had left.

“Most people will have to wait for a space farm,” my sister said. She took the plate of frozen fish balls from the counter and tilted them into the boiling water with barely a splash. “Mars can make requests. Everyone else enters a lottery.”

Across from them in their little huddle, I set the table. That was my job, the one task that involved nothing sharp or hot or wet. Three sets of chopsticks for them. For me, a plastic cup and a packet of amino acid/protein powder, which should taste a little more like chocolate given its astronomical price.

Dad added a splash of sesame oil to the pot. The soup noodles smelled good, like childhood, like the before times.

I haven’t been able to digest normal food for a few years, but the smell still made me hungry, and I sometimes indulged. It wasn’t good for my system, nor was it good for my wounds. Most days I just sipped my drink upstairs in my room. Mom would eat in front of the TV; she was the only one still able to stomach the news, or felt it was her duty to watch the news. Dad retreated to the basement.

I was mixing the powder with water, trying to dissolve the clumps, when Meili said, “In my current position, I am considered essential personnel for the governing body of the World Congress. Since they’re going to be located on Mars, I was given dispensation to bring my family.”

I think we all stopped breathing for a second. My parents were awestruck. To be honest, so was I.

Then I saw Meili fiddling with her necklace, turning each bead over one after another, a nervous habit that made it look like she was trying to undo a particularly difficult combination lock.

“But they only gave me three tickets,” Meili plowed on, “for me, and two others.”

The congratulatory hubbub ceased.

My dad asked, into the silence, “Why only three?”

“They don’t take contaminated people on Mars,” Meili said, not looking at me.

My face felt hot and cold. The palm of my hand began to tingle. I laughed, but the sound came out wrong. “I thought medical records were supposed to be sealed. What did you do, Meili, tell them on your first day of work that your sister was a freak?”

“That is not my name,” she said.

Dad reached over slowly and turned off the heat on the stove. He grabbed the ladle from the sideboard and began to fill a bowl. “We should eat,” he said, “and it is an easy fix. I am the eldest, I will stay behind and enter the lottery.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” mom retorted, “they’ll need aerospace engineers, I can put my request in for Mars separately. They may need my skill set.”

Meili and I stared at each other across the dining table.

“You don’t want me to go,” I said.

Meili pointed at my murky brown protein drink, the clumps still floating on top. “You’ve dragged mom and dad down with you for years. Dad had to quit his job to take care of you. You don’t do anything. You have no quality of life.”

“Stop it—girls,” dad dropped the ladle with a clank.

But my sister kept going. “Being dependent has always gotten you at-

tention. They've always loved you more. Did you hear them? They will even die for you. No matter what I do, how good I am, I'll always have to wonder if they would have done that for me."

"Meili," mom said, "you cannot say things like that. Apologize to your sister."

"Fine. I'm the monster," my sister said, her eyes starting to fill up, "you've always taken her side. You both do."

I felt strangely like laughing. How strange to think that Meili envied me, of all people. I had envied her for so long I don't even remember when I started. Was it the day of her college graduation—*summa cum laude*, of course—when dad and I were late for the ceremony because the doctor was running behind at the wound clinic where I was being seen for a second opinion? No, it must have been before. But that was the day our paths began to diverge so clearly, hers leading to bigger and better jobs, achievements, influence; and mine leading me to the next doctor, and the one after that.

I was angry, wasn't I? Maybe I had changed so much I could no longer feel the depths of that anger I used to feel for my sister. I did feel sorry for her. Her moment of triumph ruined because she dared to say what she had held back for so long. Annoying as my sister was, she was always a break in the silence. She never went along with the mutual pretense that everything was going to be ok.

Sometimes one had no appreciation for one's own gifts until someone else looked on them with envy.

"Dad, I agree with Mei—with Maeve," I said. My throat was dry. "I am not going to Mars. I am staying here. On earth."

Then everyone started yelling. My sister looked angry, and then confused.

Maybe I should have done this sooner, but my wound was doing one

of those cyclical fluctuations when it seemed to get smaller. Whenever the wound got smaller, dad became more hopeful, and mom was less stressed, and everything was peaceful at home.

It was time to come clean. I did not need to be shielded anymore.

I showed them the wound in my hand under the kitchen light. Overruling dad's objections, I peeled back the skin of my palm, and it came away easily, like the rind on a ripe fruit. And where there should have been flesh beneath, instead there was something shiny, striated, like an insect's shell made of plastic.

They were still confused.

I had everyone suit up. We went to the edge of the forest, which even now, after dinner, was a phosphorescent yellow, glowing in the dark. I opened my palm before them then and they could see it, iridescent green-yellow-pink dots running along the tissue beneath the wound.

From inside my palm, I pulled out a globule the size of a kernel of corn, bright yellow-green and having the same consistency as plastic beads strung on a bracelet. I dropped it to the earth, and they saw the glimmer of it in the ground.

As we waited for the next ten, fifteen minutes, I told them about that day, when Meili graduated from college, and I went to the wound care clinic.

Dad was in the packed waiting room, trying to estimate how late we would be for Meili's graduation party.

The medical assistant saw the wound on my palm. She just won't undress this one, she said. The others looked like normal wounds, but not this one. When the doctors see it, they've been told to report it to the authorities, and she did not know what was going to happen to those people. Don't let the doctor see it, she said, as she went out of the room.

Some wounds were not to be opened before others. Some wounds were not to be spoken of.

I didn't stay long enough for the doctor to show up. I told dad I was feeling nauseous, and we never returned to that clinic.

My parents and sister heard me out. They watched as a phosphorescent yellow shoot emerged from the ground and unfurled an orange-yellow-green leaf.

I held the seeds of life in the palm of my hand. The forest behind us has had unnatural growth and density in recent years, because of me.

I told them that I had changed, that I was changing, and I knew I could live in this new earth—because it was made for people, for *creatures* like me.

Back home, we stood in the decontamination chamber in silence. My parents couldn't look at me, not for a couple of days. But Meili—Maeve—did. For the first time in a long time, she looked at me without glancing away, and in her eyes I saw respect.

* * *

A few weeks later, I watched the rocket taking my sister and my parents to Mars until it vanished into the sky. I watched and waited, until even the trail had dispersed.

That evening, I walked past my respirator and my protective suit where they hung in the foyer, into the teeming air. I stopped at the edge of the red-gold forest and began to peel at the wound in my hand.

Throw Your Parent's Bones

by Jennifer Lee Rossman

The ice sculpture was melting. Hardly a notable occurrence, seeing as it was the hottest summer on record and the museum air conditioning kept cutting out.

But here's the thing. Two things, actually. One, only the eyes seemed to be melting and two, no one knew where the ice sculpture came from.

We spent hours trying to figure it out, contacting every catering company in the city to see if they had maybe delivered to the wrong address and there was some banquet somewhere missing its shimmering glacial centerpiece. No dice, and twin rivers of tears continued to flow down the impossibly lifelike, serene face of the man in the toga.

... *was* he a man?

I stepped closer, feeling the cool air radiating off of the sculpture. We'd been using he/him pronouns because of the sharp angles on the jawline and the extraordinarily defined muscles, so realistic that I convinced myself I could see the veins straining as the figure held the heavy jug. Aquarius, we figured, mythical son of Prometheus.

But where the toga fell away from the chest, and I swore the folds hadn't been arranged like that when I first looked hours ago, the ice rounded in a gentle dome shape like a breast on a marble statue. And the fingers, the way they delicately curled around the handle, they reminded me of my own. Too thin, too dainty.

In places, where the surface of the ice was impossibly smooth and glassy, I could see myself in the crying sculpture with the ambiguous gender.

* * *

I don't know exactly when we realized the sculpture wasn't melting right. Probably long before anyone mentioned it. I can't speak for anyone else, but I sure as hell wasn't going to be the first person to point out that, despite gallons of water having accumulated at the figure's feet, the actual shape of the ice hadn't changed one bit.

We could notice it, we could worry about it in the backs of our minds, but as long as we didn't acknowledge it, as long as we didn't say there was a problem, we could keep pretending everything was fine.

We could. I knew we could, because I'd spent my whole life doing just that.

The rest of the staff found the whole situation amusing, started posting about the mystery ice sculpture on the museum's social media pages. People called the story fake, because the volume of the water cascading from their face had already exceeded the entire volume of water necessary to make a sculpture that size.

Gotta love the Internet. It's easier to talk about the truth when you're hiding behind a screen name.

We finally acknowledged it with a long silence followed by a collective "Well, shit." And then another long silence for good measure.

"He's not made of ice," one of the archivists declared, her face betraying the confidence of her voice. "He's glass, chilled somehow, and there's..." She uncrossed her arms to gesture vaguely at the sculpture,

like trying to wave away an insect. “There’s pipes under the floor or something, going up through him to make him cry.”

My body gave an involuntary shudder each time she referred to them as he or him. I glanced at the sculpture, at the rivulets tracing down their cheeks faster than ever.

“There’s no pipes in the floor,” the head of maintenance pointed out. “And isn’t it a girl, anyway? It’s got boobs.”

Tears pricked at my own eyes, unbidden by any particular emotion. At least, any I was willing to acknowledge. Maybe it was easier to react to the misgendering of a block of ice than myself.

“Anyone check the security feed? I don’t understand how they snuck him in.”

“Them,” I said quietly, but with a rage that rumbled like an iceberg breaking off and falling into the sea.

In the silence that followed, I felt the eyes on me. Everyone staring. Scrutinizing.

I looked to the sculpture as if for confirmation; I could have sworn they had raised their head to look at me. “They aren’t a man or a woman.” I paused, debating. “And . . . and neither am I.”

For a second, just a second, the tears of the person made of ice slowed to a mere trickle. Then the archivist opened her mouth again.

“Oh please. I’ve borrowed pads from you, you’re as much of a woman as I am.”

Usually, I could let comments like that roll off my back. At least until the end of the day, when my pillow could muffle the sound and catch the moisture of my tears. But something changed that day. Maybe I had just had enough, or maybe it was the person in the ice. All I know is I balled

my hands up at my sides, took a deep breath as water flooded over my shoes, and informed them, “I’m not a woman.”

* * *

The news of the glaciers breaking off and melting at unprecedented rates hardly registered as anything more than background noise after my announcement, after all the people I thought I knew and trusted proceeded to laugh at me, to tell me how genders worked and that I just wanted attention.

“We have more important things to worry about right now,” I said, abandoning the pretext of mopping up the water with a towel. “The building is going to flood at this point.”

“Checked the schematics,” the maintenance man said, surreptitiously sneaking glances at my body as if checking for something, some obvious sign of my gender. “Aquarius here is situated over—”

“Shouldn’t it be *Aquaria*?” someone interrupted. “That’s the female suffix.”

Oh for the love of androgyny. I put my hands on either side of my head and squeezed. Really? They really had to nitpick what to call them? And they say we care too much about pronouns . . .

I looked for someone, anyone, to share a reassuring glance with, to tell me I wasn’t wrong to be bothered about this. I found only the sculpture, and this time I knew they had turned to look at me but no one else saw it, no one else saw the desperation and pain in their hollow, weeping eyes.

“Aquarium,” I said quietly. “That’s the gender neutral version.”

The corners of their mouth quirked upward, and for a moment I thought my veins had turned to ice.

“What are you?” I asked, my cautious footsteps creating ripples as I

walked closer to them.

Around us, people still argued about what to call them, about checking the security feed, about calling the city to shut off the water mains that were clearly supplying Aquarium’s tears. Around us, the museum was as hot and chaotic as the rest of the world.

But there, in the impossibly cool air radiating around the impossible crying ice person, all was calm and quiet. Quiet enough that I should have been able to hear the ice breaking and creaking as they turned their head, as they took one hand off the jug. But there was no sound to their movement, no cracks appeared in the flawless exterior. They moved with the shimmering ease of water dancing over river rocks.

“What are you?” I asked again, although even now, I don’t know if there’s really an answer to that question. At least not one humans can properly comprehend.

They looked at me, with empty eyes carved from liquid ice, with rage and desperation and hope and plans. They extended their hand as if in offering.

I took it. So I guess everything that has happened since, I guess that’s all because of me.

* * *

My skin on their hand felt like an insect balancing delicately on little more than surface tension and faith. But in that contact, I was connected to something bigger, something primordial. Vengeful, even, but not altogether evil.

I saw people like me, forced into invisibility or shoved into the spotlight of impromptu comedy clubs. Prosecuted for crimes because of cis demeanors. Tortured, discriminated, murdered.

“What does that have to do with you?” I asked, but the water was up to

my ankles now and people were noticing.

“Save the artifacts!” someone shouted, inciting a chaotic scramble to determine which items were most valuable and susceptible to water damage. Not that it would matter soon.

I saw flooding. Worldwide, biblical scale stuff. I saw a tidal wave about to consume an island country made of concentric circles. But before I could possibly begin to make a connection between these visions, a stone tablet was shoved into my arms, breaking the connection between me and Aquarium.

The rest of the staff’s frantic chatter became white noise, but one shouted order cut through the rest, loud and clear and alarming as an air raid siren.

“If we can’t find the source of the water in the rest of the building, smash the damn statue, see what’s under him!”

Panic surged through me. If I knew then what would come from allying with the crying ice person, would I have felt relieved at the idea of destroying them? Would it have made any difference? I don’t know, and I don’t really care. It happened, for better or worse, it happened.

“Run,” I said, because some sort of water deity had entered my life and they were a they like me and that was all that mattered.

For a second, the tears stopped flowing, just froze in place like icicles. Then the person—god, being, whatever—shattered into a fine mist and became part of the flood.

* * *

Cars floated down the street like boats in a river. I didn’t dare open the front door, the deluge nearing the top of our stairs and wheelchair ramp.

Torrential rainstorms from higher elevations in the area, the weather reports would say, because they couldn’t admit they didn’t know. Closer to

the coast, the blame would be on the melting ice caps, rapidly rising sea levels.

I stared for a moment, we all did, and then I ran for the roof. Like there was anywhere to go once I got there. Like there was ever anywhere to go.

I wasn't the only one on the roof, but I was still by myself, looking down at the city below going the way of Atlantis, counting disappearing windows and wondering how many stories to go until the end.

I still held the stone tablet.

I couldn't read ancient Greek, but I had given the story to enough tour groups to appreciate the irony.

It was the story of Deucalion, son of Prometheus, one of only two survivors of the great flood that ended the first bronze age. A cleansing flood, supposedly.

"This sort of thing isn't supposed to happen anymore," I whispered to the water as it began to lap over the ledge of the roof. "We've done so much. Computers, medicine, music. You can't just erase us."

The water at my feet formed the shape of a hand, raising up, beckoning me. And part of me wanted to go. Not because staying there was so bad, although I had felt like I'd been drowning ever since puberty. This wasn't running away, I tried to convince myself, it was running toward something.

I just didn't know what.

I took their hand.

* * *

In the Greek myth, it rained for nine days. This time around, I'm not sure. I think I melted, became indistinguishable from my tears and all the tears

shed in the name of gender dysphoria, and I lost track of time.

"If this is some Kevin Costner Waterworld bullshit ..." I said as I came to on a tiny island of a mountaintop, but the flood had washed the rage from my words.

Aquarium stood before me. Aquarius. Aquaria. All of them, none of them, constantly shifting through the spectrum of genders and into ultraviolet and infrared genders the human mind could only imagine. I tried very hard not to make a joke about them being genderfluid.

"Why?" I demanded instead, gesturing at the endless blue with the tablet I still held. The loss was so great, it hadn't sunk in. Maybe it never would. Maybe I would go on forever, being mildly irritated at the loss of everything and everyone I had ever known, ever would have known, never would have had the chance to know, because it was just too much to fathom.

When they didn't answer, I elaborated. "You killed everyone on earth. Destroyed everything. What, to punish us? To mark the end of another age of man? Who gave you the right?" I could hear my voice growing more shrill. "And why would you save me of all people?" I asked, putting my hand to my chest.

My flat chest.

Aquarium smiled. I forgot how to breathe for a second.

I rushed to the water's edge, looked at my reflection and saw myself staring back for the first time. Not the soft, round face that broadcasted femininity no matter how I tried to hide it, and not the angular face of masculinity that scared me away from considering testosterone. The best parts of both, to go with my flat chest and my uterus and my hair that was... I pulled it in front of me to look. Blue. All right. Yeah, blue hair. Would have preferred purple, but...

My hair was purple.

I looked up at Aquaria/ius/ium. “Does the rest of it work like the hair?”

They gave a slow nod.

For an extremely selfish second, everything felt okay, my body in balance with my mind. “It’s still not right. We don’t even believe in you anymore! How can you just ... just come into our lives and decide we are doing something wrong and ... and destroy everything!”

In my frustration, I flung the stone tablet as far as I could. It landed with a distant splash and began to sink.

The smile became a smirk and I realized what I had done.

* * *

When it fell on Deucalion and his wife Pyrrha to repopulate the world, they were told to throw their mothers’ bones into the water. Their mothers’ bones, presumably, having been submerged somewhere under the worldwide ocean, this perplexed them until they realized it referred to the bones of Mother Earth: rocks.

Stones.

The stones thrown by Deucalion became men. The stones thrown by Pyrrha, women.

And I had just thrown a stone.

For the first time, the being I had met as a crying ice sculpture spoke. “It didn’t have to be you any more than it had to be them last time. It just had to be someone. One person, this time, not limited by gender. You can make men, women, both, neither, other genders entirely. This time, from the beginning, openly and without pain, the perfect body for every person who will ever be born.”

“I don’t want to be the parent of the entire human race,” I said after a long

moment, tears tracing salty tracks down my cheeks. “I don’t want a new world, no matter how good gender euphoria feels. It’s not worth everyone we lost, all the good people. I want them back.”

With the ease of water moving downhill, they came to my side, took my hand. The way they looked at me, I wondered if they could see themselves reflected in me.

This touch did not bring me microaggressions and systemic transphobia, nor did it give me visions of the final days of Atlantis. Rather, it gave me knowledge that I don’t think they could explain any more than I could understand with words.

They had found a better way, in the millennia since the last flood. These were cleansing waters, indeed, but not cleansing the earth of humanity. Cleansing humanity of pain.

I saw the waters recede, leaving everything dry and alive and oblivious, everyone in a body that had the parts and the hormones and the pronouns that would make their soul sing. And nothing fixed, everything fluid, adjusting and changing as needed.

“No one will know.”

“No one will know,” they confirmed.

“They won’t remember, they won’t—”

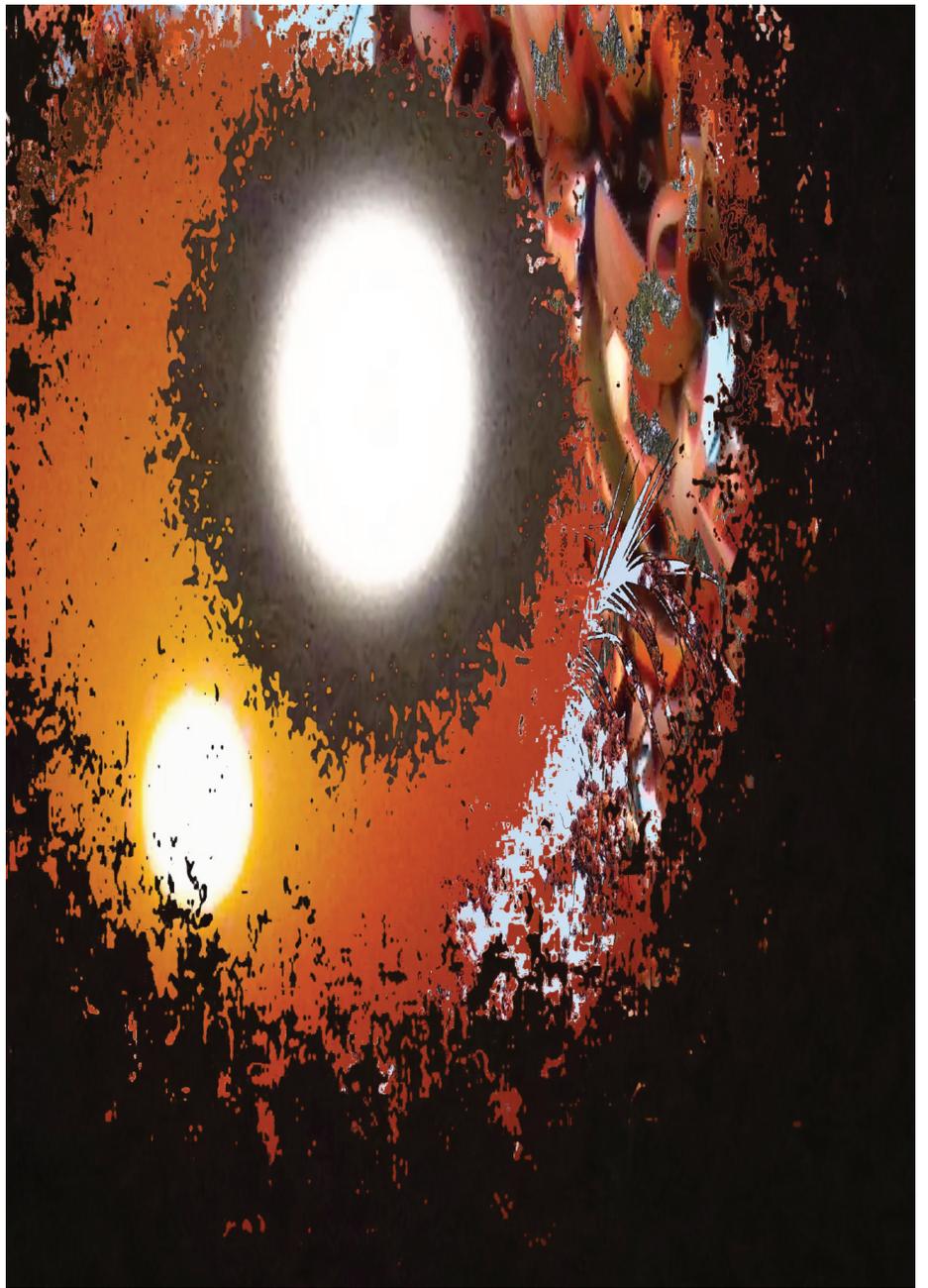
“Only in myths will there be a time when mankind pretended to have two genders. Cautionary tales about the lies we tell ourselves.”

I shook my head slowly. “I don’t want this responsibility.”

But they were gone, evaporated in the heat of a warm summer morning and leaving me alone on an island that was slowly becoming a mountain once more.

Juxtaposed

by Sonali Roy



Top Field Tanks

by Ray Daley

The day had been going well, up to that point. Then my walkie chirped into life. “Base to Mason. Mason, you got your ears on?”

I checked my safety line was still securely clipped on.

“Come on, Mason! I know you’re still in range. Pick up.”

I double-checked the line, then finally pulled the walkie from my belt. “How about giving a guy a chance to breathe, before you start ragging on him to pick up? Mason here, and it better be god-damn important after that. I was on top of four, checking the feed lines. Over.”

“I’m getting screwy readings from the top field, Mason. I need you to get eyes on tanks one and two. Can’t tell exactly what it is. Take a full kit. Reckon you can make it there within the hour? Over.”

“Hold for two, base? I’m gonna take a look with the binoculars. Over.”

I clipped the walkie back to my belt and pulled my binoculars from around my neck. I had been about to do these checks next anyway. If they had waited a few more minutes, I would have been able to tell them exactly what the problem was. We always did visual checks on the top field when we were up on tanks three or four. As I started to adjust the zoom control, it became clear that I was wasting my time.

“Mason to base. No immediate eyeball from the top of four. If you give me ten minutes, I’ll try again from three. Wait, out.”

Phipps was the operator back at base control. He knew when to wait, but he had a funny sense of humour about giving me a hard time.

Eighty steps, ten sets of eight stairs. But I was flying down them. It was always faster going down, normally because by this point in the day I’d be due to head back to base to write up my daily report. Most of the ten minutes I’d asked Phipps to wait were spent walking up to the top of tank number three. Getting down was easy, there were two quick ways down.

The second method wasn’t exactly by the book though.

I was starting to breathe heavily by the time I reached the catwalk at the top of the tenth set of steps on tank number three. I took several deep breaths, trying to calm my heart rate. Then I looked through the binoculars again. Nothing but green from here too. Damn it. “Mason to base. No immediate eyeball from the top of three either, Phipps. I guess I’m going in. I’ll log back in before I reach blackout point. Mason out.”

The tanks weren’t considered to be a great height. You had to wear a safety line during inspections, but that was just down to bureaucracy and regulations. If those people had any clue what I was about to do next, they’d have had kittens. *Dozens of them.*

But now wasn’t the time to be worrying about people like that. There was a problem in the top field, and it needed to be inspected as fast as humanly possible.

By BASE jumping standards, the towers shouldn’t have even been

possible. But I'd given them a once over on my first day on the job, and ever since I'd been determined to find out if a safe jump was even possible. I guess it looked like I was about to find out the hard or messy way.

I wore the chute all the time, I packed it myself, as every self-respecting jumper does. I had it more as a back-up plan, in the event my safety line ever failed. Today I was finally going to use it for its actual purpose. I walked to the centre of the catwalk that led out onto the inspection platform and slowly climbed over the waist-high barrier. I checked the safety line and finally unclipped it. Then I took the drogue chute into my right hand and jumped as far away from the catwalk as I could, throwing the drogue into the air behind me.

There's a moment for BASE jumpers. It's the most frightening fraction of a second, the time between jumping and chute deploying, so you don't plummet to your death, or break most of the bones in your body. I call it the *flumf*.

It's the sound of reassurance, the noise which means you're going to live to jump another day. *Flumf*, the sound of air filling your chute. The sound of you failing to reach terminal velocity. Thank god and the baby Jesus for *flumf*.

Less than two seconds later I was braking, running onto the grass and already rotating my body to start gathering up my chute before it hit the ground too.

You aren't supposed to pack a chute as you walk, but I didn't have a choice or the time to spare. I wasn't even walking either, I was more half-running to reach the truck as fast as possible. Two minutes. I'd have to either check or repack it later.

* * *

My foot was stuck to the floor the entire time until I saw the signs at the side of the dirt track we laughingly called a road. It was gradually

getting worse by the day now, eroding in places; what little asphalt that did still exist was cracked where the grasses and shrubs had begun to reclaim nature's domain. I quickly feathered the brakes a dozen times in succession, hitting the posted marker precisely.

Any further, the truck would be useless. Over a thousand pounds of inert metal, not something one average man would be able to push back across the blackout point.

"Mason to base. I've reached the blackout point. If you hear explosions, that's just me doing a little deforestation. Someone let those damn trees grow too long, probably that asshole Mercer, I'd wager. If I don't come back, be sure he fixes this mess himself. I'll leave the walkie in the truck. You know who to call if I don't make it, Phipps. Mason out."

Phipps was thanking his lucky stars right now that I hadn't let him interrupt me. I loaded the dynamite into my pack, then realised my mistake. I wasn't going to be able to carry the repair pack and wear my chute too. What to do, leave it behind? Not an option; who knew what I might run into on the top field? We went there as infrequently as we had to. All kinds of weird stuff came through that rift.

Thankfully, most of it realised this side wasn't exactly a greener kind of grass and went right back, or least it went back sooner, rather than later. Though in the past I had heard all kinds of roars and growls there that were most definitely not mountain lions or pumas.

I knew exactly what those sounded like, having heard them hundreds of times before. Then I smiled to myself. I could wear the chute and the repair pack too. It was just a matter of turning the chute the wrong way around so it was on my chest, not my back. Now I could sling the repair pack across my back and start the long hike up towards the top field.

Wait. Not so fast.

I slowly pushed just my head beyond the signpost denoting the start of the blackout point. Of course, it was raining over there. So I quickly pulled my head back again, wiping the water from my head and face. I went back to the truck and pulled my rain slicker from the cab, draping it across the repair pack. Wet dynamite was no use to anyone. Then I saw my hat, stashed under the passenger seat. So I went around to the other door and pulled it out, placing it onto my head. It didn't matter if me or my chute got wet. The repair pack was the only important thing.

* * *

We found the blackout point five years ago, entirely by accident. Well, it wasn't me, it was Mercer.

He'd been called out to inspect a leak on tank number one, so of course, he set off hell for leather, pedal totally to the metal and not sparing the horses. He had no clue why his engine suddenly stopped working, at what was then a seemingly random point on the track up to the top field. Obviously, he tried to get the thing going again; all of us knew enough to repair most of the vehicles we've got in the fleet.

To no avail, unfortunately for him.

So Mercer called for help, or at least he tried to. Because that's when he found that not only did his truck no longer function, his lifeline, his walkie, was dead too.

All the technicians in the division knew from personal experience that the walkies had always worked up in the top field before. If anything on the plant was liable to break first, it almost always seemed to be in the top field. It was the highest point, exposed to the worst of the weather. That was generally where we spent most of our time, fixing leaks, replacing coolant lines, tightening cover plates.

Up until that day, the top field had been our bread and butter. Good

overtime, thanks to the top field. But no, that asshole Mercer had to go and ruin it for everyone.

In hindsight, I guess that if it hadn't been him that discovered the blackout point, it probably would have been me, and right now it would have been my name he'd have been cursing in my place. It wasn't me who went down to rescue him though, I wasn't even on shift that day, nor was I on call either. Not that it didn't mean I wasn't there that first day.

I ended up going to rescue the guys who were rescuing the rescuers.

I had heard Phipps over the walkie, just before I got there. "Don't come flying down the road, Mason! Stop before the four-mile marker, and make god-damn sure that you do. Or they'll be rescuing you too, man!" Jesus H Mulgrue. It had been serious if he'd been called from control to go save their miserable asses.

And now I was saving his miserable ass. Not that he hadn't got me out of a ton of hard spots in the past.

As I rolled to a halt by the four-mile marker, Phipps was standing in the middle of the road, waving his arms above his head wildly, like some sort of crazy person. "Mason, do not go any further, man. There's something just in front of you which kills engines and electrical devices stone dead. I need you to undo your winch cable. I'll hook it up to my truck."

I was about to say that I couldn't even see his truck.

"I know, Mason. You can't see the damn thing. Trust me, it's just a few feet past the marker. I'll undo my cable and hook up to Green. He can hook up to Mercer, and you can be the big hero who saved all our miserable asses, okay? They'll owe you drinks forever. We all will. No more shitty duties for you, Mason!"

I was confused as all hell, but Phipps dragged that winch cable and

as soon as he walked beyond the four-mile marker, he completely vanished. Like he went from being into non-existence. Only for about thirty seconds or so, I guess that was all the time it took him to hook the winch to the back of his truck. Because all of a sudden, there he was again, like he had just torn through matter.

Phipps could clearly see the look on my face and questions I wanted to ask. “Listen, Mason, don’t ask how it works, or what the hell it even is. Just accept that it’s there, and it’s stopping us getting back again under our own steam. Fire that winch up and start backing your truck the hell away from this sign.”

So, that was exactly what I did. I had never argued with Phipps before, and he had never given me a reason to doubt his word either. Phipps wasn’t one of those guys who liked to play pranks. If he said something invisible had a bunch of trucks inside it, it was true. I hadn’t backed up any more than a few feet before I could see Phipps’ truck simply materialising in front of mine. And when it got far enough, I saw him lean out of the window and give me a massive thumbs up. When his front bumper finally cleared the invisible barrier, Phipps was able to start his truck too.

So now it was both of us pulling.

Sure enough, mere minutes later I could see the familiar buckled tailgate which Green was so proud of, for all the wrong reasons. And finally Mercer and his truck, a few more minutes after that.

We painted a white line across the asphalt that day. Mercer still had to go up to the top field, lugging all his gear by hand. But at least we knew it was there now.

* * *

Even from that very first day there had been weird reports. Odd creatures sighted, things that couldn’t possibly be. But then again, an invisible barrier which stopped engines and electrical devices couldn’t

possibly exist either, unless it was some classified government experiment run amok.

As I hiked through the pouring rain, I knew I had to keep moving up the road, no matter what. I hadn’t bothered slinging the shotgun across my shoulder too; I knew that the beasts around these parts wouldn’t even be mildly bothered by it. I’d loaded more than triple my desired amount of dynamite though. Better to be safe than sorry!

As the hill began to grow steeper, the original road dwindled to a footpath. It was hard to believe that we had ever driven diggers and loaders up here, once upon a time, what felt like a million years or so ago. Now I had to watch my footing on every step; the rocks were slimy, caked in some kind of green algae we’d never been able to identify, but the damn crap got everywhere! The number of times I’d had to syphon it from the various feed pipes leading to and from the tanks on the top field.

The rain had finally let up now, and the grass started to reach above my knees at this point. This was where things started feeling uncomfortable, with that sensation that anything could be hiding inside it. And it certainly wouldn’t be friendly. Going by the noises I’d heard before, it definitely wasn’t going to be friendly.

As I rounded the crest of the hill, I could see tank number one. And a tree, snaking up and around a quarter of its dome. I’d have to blast that off for sure, half a stick, by my best estimate. I cut in under the dome, planting half a stick of dynamite from my pack, then began walking backwards, paying out enough fuse wire to get a safe enough distance away to drop the tree and not get hit by any potential shrapnel from the blast, either.

I was at the southernmost caution sign when I saw it. Well, them. *Dinosaurs!*

Then a memory from a childhood book came to mind. *Bra-chiosaurus.*

At least I wasn't in any immediate danger of being eaten by these enormous creatures. They only ate plants. Probably the same plants that were now beginning to overcome tanks one and two.

I had wound out a fuse that equated to about twenty minutes burn time and now I set it alight. Then I started sprinting for the tree at the side of tank number two. I set a fourteen-minute wire in the stick I left there, and then started up the stairs as quickly as I could, given the unsteady footing. God damn you, algae!

By the time I reached the top, I could just about make out my fuse by tank number one.

It wasn't a loud explosion, but it was certainly enough of a shockwave to spook the three brachiosaurs. I could feel the vibration of their feet as they lumbered away from the noise, immediately perceived as a danger to themselves and their child. For that was what they clearly were, a family group, father, mother, and child. The brachiosaurs moved so heavily, I barely even felt the second explosion below me. And I was standing directly above it.

I heard both the trees hitting the ground though. My quick and dirty placings had worked exactly as I'd hoped they would, detonating outwards, pushing the trees away from the superstructure. I wasn't sure if it was the shockwaves of the explosions, but the air up here on the catwalks suddenly felt a great deal warmer than it ever had before. I couldn't recall the ambient air currents being this hot when I'd done previous inspections. Then again, I'd never seen any dinosaurs mooching about the place before either.

We assumed it was some kind of temporal rift, at least those of us who watched too much sci-fi on television did. It felt a lot like an episode of *Stargate*, coming up here. I had only heard growls and roars before; now I had witnessed living creatures with my own eyes. And suddenly found myself wondering if Green or Mercer had ever seen anything like this and been too nervous or embarrassed to call it in to Phipps.

Not that it mattered right now. I had to check both the tanks and blast some trees from the perimeter, so we'd be able to do visual inspections without constantly having to come here in person.

I checked all the dials and gauges on tank two; everything looked okay. The numbers were slightly higher than normal, but nothing massively outside of acceptable safe limits. So I decided to set the dynamite around the tree line, then run my fuse wires back to the base of tank number one. I figured that overkill was the better option, having seen how quickly the trees had grown since our last inspection, so I strapped up a little over half my sticks around the bases of the tallest trees on the edge of the field. I knew there was enough power for each of those sticks to not only drop the trees they were strapped to, but at least three or four of the trees closest to them as well.

Happy with my set-up, I wandered back to tank number one, paying out the fuse wire as I went. I could no longer see the family of brachiosaurs now. I hoped they'd been scared enough to go back through the rift. If they had any sense, they'd return to somewhere familiar, a place they all felt safe. So I lit the fuse and started walking up the steps to the top of tank number one.

I'd almost completed the inspection when the first stick went off, followed by the cacophony of all the others, and the trees falling no more than a few hundred metres away from where I was standing.

The roar I heard immediately afterwards made all my hair stand on end. I figure that most people have seen *Jurassic Park*, so I don't need to describe what a raptor looks like. Or even what fourteen raptors looked like. At least that was my rough count, and boy, were they pissed off!

I can only guess that they had been hunting in the treeline, near where I had planted half of my dynamite. And now I'd spooked a whole pack of them, out into the open. Where the only food source was currently standing no more than a few hundred metres away

from them.

Yours truly, fresh meat.

Things I knew about raptors: They hunted in pairs, they moved fast, and they had razor-sharp talons, used for slashing prey. They were pretty smart too.

And now running towards the bottom of the stairs.

The actual stairs themselves did slow them down. Thank god for algae! The delay was only about eight seconds, which was all the time it took them to work out how to start climbing.

Then I was in a bad place, at the top of tank number one, with no way back down those stairs. *What to do? What to do?*

When my repair pack dug into my spine, I soon remembered. I was still wearing my chute! Admittedly, I had it on backwards, and I hadn't exactly packed it under optimal conditions, but I had it. And I was going to have to trust it with my life or end up as dinner for a bunch of angry ravenous raptors. A pack. Or whatever the hell their collective name was.

Meat hungry bastards. Yes, that was probably it.

I quickly shucked off my pack, primed the rest of my dynamite, lit the shortest fuse I still had left, and tossed it over the side. Where it landed with a sickening thud. That attracted the attention of some of the Raptors, who were right on top of it, and about to slice it to ribbons when the remaining dynamite went off.

Never let it be said that raptors can't fly. Well, exploded bits of them certainly can.

Not that it mattered. I only had about ten seconds left, nowhere near

enough time to take my chute off and put it on correctly. Or even enough time to consider repacking it. I had to jump in the next few seconds and hope. Hope that my chute deployed and that I could toggle my way over the heads of the raptors who were still alive and majorly pissed off, down on the ground below me. Or hope it didn't and that I broke my neck on impact. Because at least then I wouldn't be alive to know how much trouble I was in.

I felt the hot gusts of air around the tower again. Could it be? Was something creating a kind of thermal updraft? Was this my way out? Then I heard the clanking of raptor claws on the catwalk. No time left for thinking. I jumped, tossing my drogue chute over my shoulder.

And goddamn it but if that thing didn't open exactly as it was designed to. Being worn back to front, and it still functioned correctly. If there's a God, I'll thank him or her later. For the updraft of warm air that began to lift me too.

I wasn't falling.

Physics said I should be, but apparently, God disagreed, so physics had to politely go and fuck itself.

I quickly located my braking toggles, using them to gain more altitude. I could steer now and started making my way back down the hill, towards the blackout point. I had no idea what it would do to a parachute, but with several raptors still chasing me on the ground, I had no other choice. I couldn't hope to circle on uncertain thermals forever. I had to get the hell out of there while it was still feasible.

At least I know how the passage through the blackout point affects a parachute now. Luckily for me, it was not at all.

I knew exactly where my truck was parked. In fact, I landed a few steps in front of it. As fast as raptors are, I had ground effect in my

favour, and twenty years of jumping experience too. They didn't follow me. I assume seeing me suddenly disappear into thin air confused the merry hell out of their tiny minds. Whatever it did, it gave me long enough to gather up my chute, start the truck, and get the heck out of there.

* * *

We erected twelve-foot-high metal fence panels the next day, for ten miles in either direction. And they were completely flat on the back,

so anything with claws would find them impossible to climb. Or at least that's what I hope.

I'm not the next one scheduled to inspect the top field. Oh no. I'm off all shitty duties forever now!

“What's with the retractable ladder, Mason?”

Mercer will find out soon enough, the asshole. Oh boy, will he find out!

The System of Crimson Octopus: OctoPrime

by Yuliia Vereta

OctoPrime is the main planet
in the System of Crimson Octopus,
it is the source, the motherplanet
that was born the first in the system,
and is called Planet Zero by the locals.

It is a home of the Time Masters,
who can not only travel in time,
but also, revert it and hide
its separate units without a trace,
without tearing the fabric of reality,
maintaining the sequence of events.

The main secret
of their perfect history
are the time pockets,
where they place
everything that should be hidden
from prying eyes
or substantial things
they are simply not proud of.

They store those pockets
in the Library of Times, -
which, on the outside, looks
like a flat pebble,
placed on a white pedestal.

The legend says that one day
the Messiah will come, who
will break the stone into two
equal halves, then throw one
in the darkness of space,
and break the other one
into fine shiny pieces.

And those pieces will get back
to the places in history
they always belonged to,
bringing back battles lost,
making centuries of wars real again,
and transform the reality
to make it the way it really is
and not the way they believed
was the only right one.



Cosmic Timekeeper

by Carl Scharwath

Music for Deep Space

by Lauren McBride

The sounds absent in space
become less distressing
with music playing, especially
ambient music with nature's gifts
mingled in. Listening, eyes closed,
I revel in the patter of rain, splash
of surf, wind rustled leaves,
busy crickets, bird song ...

The sounds here in space
become more bearable
with music playing—music
to muffle the constant
ticking, creaking, buzzing noises
of the ship, and occasional thump
of something hitting the hull,
making me jump.

The sounds of Bach and Vivaldi soothe
me played softly, louder to energize.
Even louder—rock music. When
snapped into my spacesuit where
no one can hear me, I sing along.
Heavy metal—louder still
and screaming, I can almost
silence the sounds in my head;

the sounds of voices talking—
talking constantly—
talking over my shipmates
in the common areas
where I sit by myself now,
non-stop noise so insistent
that I can't sleep anymore
here in space without music.

When the Flesh Opens

by Celeste Wakefield

From the beginning, you needed. And I needed to meet that need in you. That hunger. So I gave you the breast, over and over, thinking how strange that you should feed from this body freshly ripped and sutured. How powerful this instinct, stronger than exhaustion, to keep you alive.

Before the resurrection plague, in our early days of colostrum and delirium, you were not sated. As you lost weight, I too was hollowed. I hovered over the bassinet, helpless, watching your tiny chest rise and fall. Then, at last, milk. And your sighs at the breast made raw nipples endurable, antiseptic spray on my stitched perineum endurable. The pheromones of contentment filled my nose, my blood, and we slept.

I care about my body, my life. You didn't change this. But this body I care for wants to sustain you. Even now, at the end of the world, when your cry once fierce with the quickness of tiny lungs drags like a heavy thing pulled across wet leaves. Still, the sound sets my teeth grinding, my arms reaching. You sound so lonely, so sad. So hungry.

How I yearn to pick you up in your bloodstained blanket and fill your mouth with my aching breast. Yet I fear the touch of those four tiny teeth. From your birth, my body remembers ripping, a sound and a knowing that no epidural can block. It does not want to rip again. It hesitates, holds me back.

But you cannot go without food. Downstairs, the one that scratched you rots where I left it, skewered and duct taped to a dining room chair, starved to a second death. I could spare you this fate, at least, if I give you the meat you require. I would wake in your world. Carry you down. Help you find more.

When the flesh comes apart, those who give birth naturally feel intense burning, then dive into hormonal bliss. Perhaps this would not be so different. Maybe I can raise the courage, face the pain this time.

I think that it was panic, not pain, that made me scream for drugs when I birthed you. I feared I would lose myself, lose our love in the trauma.

But I've learned so much since then. In the months after birth, I discovered I am built to receive nature's indifference. To subordinate all rest and satiation my body would have needed to recover. I filled your stomach every three hours. I ate and hungered. Then, when the silence from our neighbors' houses gave way to barking dogs and the wheeze of the infected outside, I learned that trauma, like Dante's hell, always holds another round. I no longer believe in heaven or God. Yet my love for you endured.

Now we huddle under a slanted roof, alone, breathing the scent of oily smoke. You are crying out in this new way of yours. As I look out the attic window onto charred lawns and unquiet corpses, it seems that all my life I feared the wrong things.

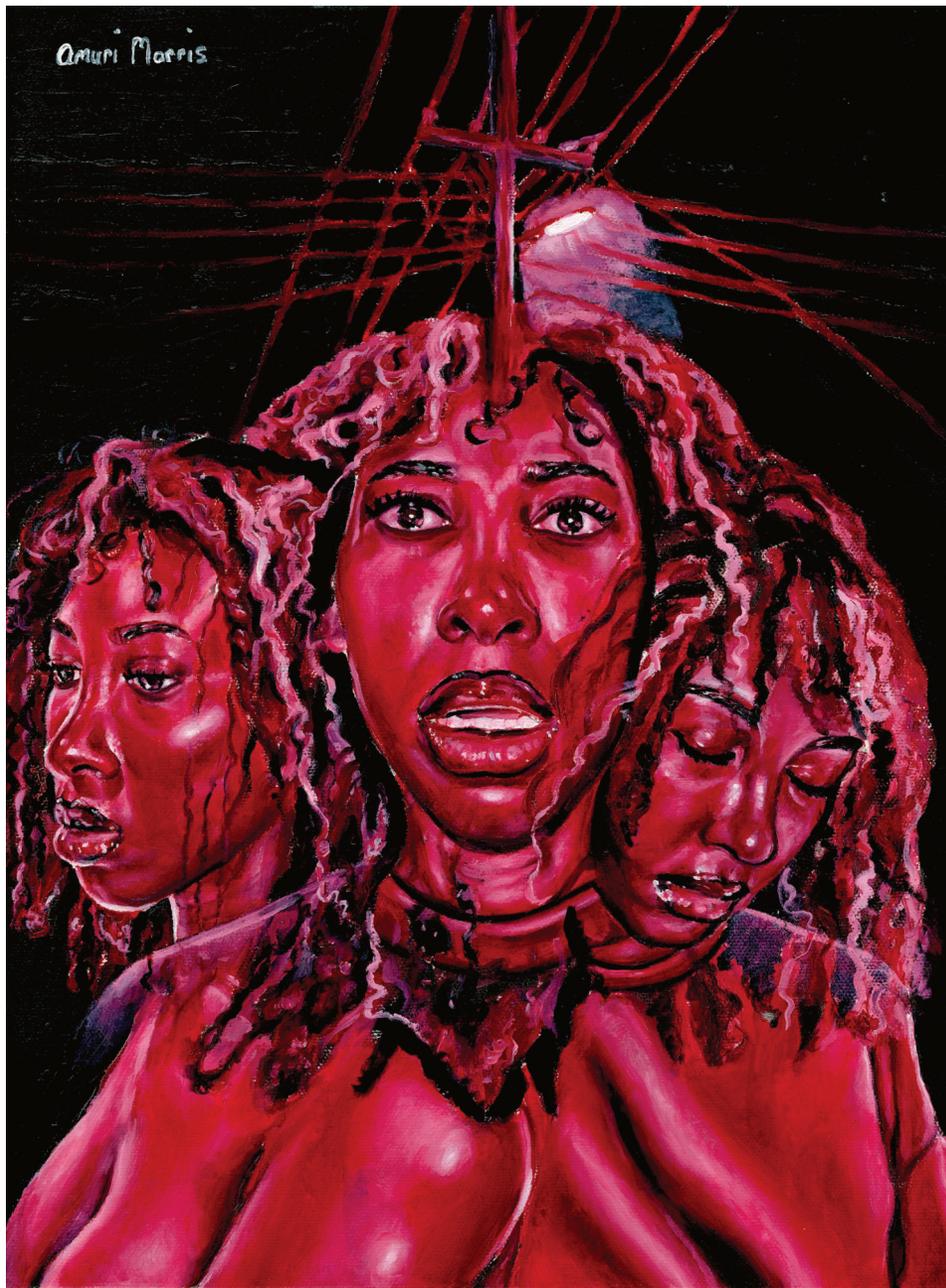
I fear pain. But I dread this milk drying up, my body accepting a loss I never will.

I fear change. But you have already changed me. I am already yours.

I will always feed you, always love you. So take now, child of my womb, seed of my shade.

Dissociating

by Amuri Morris



Spiderwebs and Starlight

by Rhonda Parrish

The situation was more bearable at night. Its sharp edges were blunted by the formless dark, by the purring bees and the soft, blanketing weight of the slumbering world. While the rest of the world slept, I was at my most productive.

I needn't look at what I was crocheting to do it. Decades of muscle memory stacked one atop the other, like the rows I continually added to the dress I was working on, meant my fingers knew their task without the aid of my eyes. The bone hook was worn in the middle where my fingers rested and rubbed ever so slightly with every stitch, molding it to my hand.

* * *

When I first met her, she was collapsed in an inconsolable heap. Tatters of her dress littered the ground around her and hung from her half-starved frame. Between tremendous heaving sobs she told me about how her stepmother and stepsisters had stripped it from her body. How they'd jeered and shouted at her as they ripped and tore.

She'd shown me the marks of this, their latest assault—the scrapes and scratches—while I picked out the evidence of their long-term torment; her scrawny limbs, hollow eyes, and broken-toothed smile.

Slowly I'd coaxed the story of her biological parents' deaths and the subsequent neglect and abuse from her foster families. Teasing it out gently with empathy, kindness, and just a little magic.

When she'd told me her dearest wish was to go to a dance—the poor thing too beat down to even dare *wish* for freedom—I knew just how

I would help her. What I didn't know was that it would result in so much death.

* * *

I smelled her before I saw her. No longer the wet, heavy stench of new death, but rather the softer, musty odour of one returned from the earth. I knew what I'd see when I opened the door, so I hesitated as long as I could, but in the end opening doors is what godmothers are meant to do, so I fulfilled my purpose.

Her stepmother had dressed her in boys' clothes when she buried her, so it was in boys' clothes that she came to me. Cuffs torn and stained with grave dirt, fingernails stripped of polish and torn from the efforts of digging. It tore my heart out to see her diminished and worm-bitten. Dressed in clothes she'd have despised.

And that's when I knew exactly what form my magic would take. Not a shroud but a dress. Another dress.

* * *

When I'd found her that first night, dressed in tatters and crying her heart out, I'd magicked up a dress, some amazing shoes, and even summoned up a limo. If feeling like a princess at a dance was her dearest wish, who was I to argue?

“This is the happiest moment of my life!” she'd exclaimed, twisting and turning to watch the dress flare and twirl around her. And indeed, the shadows had left her eyes and even her broken-toothed smile was

beautiful. She'd looked radiant when she left in the car, and even more so when she'd returned in the wee hours of the morning.

She'd met a boy at the dance. She was certain he was going to be her Prince Charming and whisk her away to a land far, far away where they could find a Happily Ever After.

Days later, when their backseat fumbling revealed something she thought he already knew, it all fell down, and the taunts of "You're not a real girl!" began.

At first it was just him. And then it was his friends. And then their friends as well. Before long she couldn't go anywhere without their voices ringing in her ears. Even when she was alone.

* * *

She rustled, like the settling of a great pile of leaves in autumn, and I stepped aside, holding the door open and feeling the chill in the wood that her proximity had caused.

"You'd better come in," I said.

She looked no more substantial than a corn husk, but as she drifted past me, she brushed against me and I felt it; her will. It was hard as iron and cold as a February blizzard.

She didn't *want* something from me, she *needed* it.

"You don't need to do this, my girl," I said.

She didn't respond, simply drifted over to a spot between the fireplace and the window. There she stood, waiting. Watching.

Thrumming.

* * *

Her mother's death, followed soon after by her father's.

Her stepmother's abuse. Horrific bullying stepsisters.

A Prince Charming who was anything but.

It was no wonder that when she found the dope she took to it so wholly. So quickly.

It burned her from the inside out, hollowed her like a jack-o-lantern. That poison did its work quicker than a cancer, and within weeks the bright-eyed, vibrant fireball I'd sent to that dance had been reduced to a slack-jawed dullard with greasy hair and a picked-at face. It destroyed her long before she finished the job herself with a rusty razor-blade.

* * *

The bees had built a nest deep in her chest. Occasionally one of them, big and bumbling, would emerge from her lips and zip around the room before finding a crack to release it into the outdoors, but eventually it would find its way back again, crawling across her bottom lip to force itself back inside. Mostly, though, they stayed where they were, inside where it was dark and warm.

Sometimes they buzzed, exactly how I'd have expected a bunch of bees to sound, but mostly they purred. Just making a soft vibration sound, a low thrum. It was soothing. Especially late at night when everything was already soft and muted.

It had taken me three full cycles of the moon to fashion and enchant my hook, and another three to make the progress I had on the dress.

She watched me from the corner between the window and fireplace, mute and pleading. It was the same place she'd been standing ever since I invited her into my home. It was the same place she'd stay until I was done.

I felt her eyes on me as I worked. Or, more specifically, the vacant holes which had once been her eyes. I wondered if she could truly see me, or if she mostly just saw the place from whence she'd come, the faces of those who had shown her the way there.

I was crocheting her dress out of spiderwebs and starlight.

Spiderwebs don't mind what shape they are in, what form they take. They have one job—to stick to their prey. To hold them fast and allow them to be reeled in. And starlight, for all the stories and poems it appears in as a wonderful, romantic force, is really old, cold and sharp as blades. Despite the fact it casts light, it is not averse to bending itself toward tasks best done in the shadows.

The yarn slipped smoothly between my fingers. I'd spun it carefully. I needn't burn or cut my hands with nettles to seal this spell; it drew strength from the hook. From the secrets I confessed to it. Binding my will to it. Empowering it. The things she would do with this spell ... I would wear them as much as she. My words ensured that.

I was torn between completing it as quickly as possible to get it over with, and putting it off because even though something might feel justified didn't make it any less evil. The real question for me wasn't one of right or wrong. I knew what I was doing—what I had done—was wrong. The question was one of who I owed my allegiance to. And that was to her.

The bees purred. Their soft murmurings soothing my conscience while urging me on.

Tonight was the night. I knew it.

There was another dance.

She would go.

She would find her vengeance upon all who had wronged her.

Finally, I could put it off no longer. The dress was done.

Plain and ordinary, it was no fancier than the rags she used to wear to clean her stepmother's chimney. Grey as wasp paper, soft as a whisper, it moved with a will of its own as I held it. Drifting as though caught in a breeze, or a current, that only it could feel.

I held it out and she stepped forward from the shadows, full into the moonlight which shone through my cracked window. The bees buzzed furiously, and I could hear them bouncing against the cage of her body.

I pulled the dress over her head and it flowed over her like water. Transforming itself into an exquisite gown full of shimmer and shifting colours as it draped over her, moving like no other fabric I'd ever seen. And as it clothed her, it disguised her as well. No longer the insubstantial husk of a person that arrived at my door some months ago, now she was dazzling and magnetic. She looked amazing. She looked happy. She looked alive.

She hugged me and the magic of her embrace forced me back into memories I'd tried to bury. Tried to stitch into the gown.

I was back there. Crouching over her stepmother like some warped gargoyle, bloodstained and twisted.

I'd meant to kill her. I'd sought her out at her hearth for just that reason. But I hadn't meant to enjoy it.

The magic of her touch made me linger on her stepmother's death, on how she'd felt writhing and weakening beneath me. How she'd clawed ineffectually at my hands around her throat. How her blood, warm and sticky, had felt as it painted my hands as I worked, taking what I needed from her. The ulna which eventually became my hook. I felt it in the room with us, that sense of purpose and satisfaction there, like a great dog sitting in the corner of the memory slaverling, drooling, and wanting me to feed it more, more, more ...

“Enough,” I said, and pulled away—I hadn’t dedicated my life to magic to be bound, helpless, by the revenant of my goddaughter. “I did what I had to in order to give you what you needed to do what you had to,” I said.

She tilted her head. Looked at me like a bird. Curious. Calculating.

And then she spun. Twisting and turning to watch the dress flare and twirl around her. And I was brought back to that night, that first night that we’d met when I’d made her a different dress. A lighter dress. A dress not designed as a weapon.

And I recalled how she’d spun. Exclaimed that it was the best night of her life.

I thought about how radiant she’d looked. How happy.

And sharp and swift as a bee sting I realized my mistake.

She hadn’t come to me for vengeance.

Not then.

Not now.

What had I done? What had I *done*?

She spun and spun, faster and faster. Kicking up a wind that picked up everything loose in my cabin, every paper, every trinket I’d collected over the years, even the bone hook I’d fashioned to do what I’d assumed had been her bidding. Around and around her it twisted, rattling windows and the door in its frame.

Only the bees seemed immune, pouring, one after another, an impossibly large number of them, from her lips and bumbling and bouncing about the place as though it were tranquil and quiet.

The door slammed open, banging against the inside wall, shattering the mirror I’d hung there.

I watched my reflection disintegrate into a hundred shards of glass—each sharp enough to cut. To kill—as she spun out the door.

Into the dark.

And away.

Taking the bees and their soft, soothing whispers with her.

To leave me alone with my tears, my regret, and my shattered life.

Morsels

by Colleen Anderson

I swallow creatures whole
each succulent bird
slippery amphibian
surprised wolf
sweet singing child

I never bite nor chew them up
only taste of their descent
ricocheting, bouncing they land
in the acid embrace of my desires

hoping, dreaming, absorbing
each word, sound and thought
all movements and skills

I inhale their spirits
effervescent as they ascend
they will complete me

a sum of all their parts



Ptolemy Rests

by Joel Bisailon

Young Emperors Grow Like Rot

by Vekhan Sametyaza

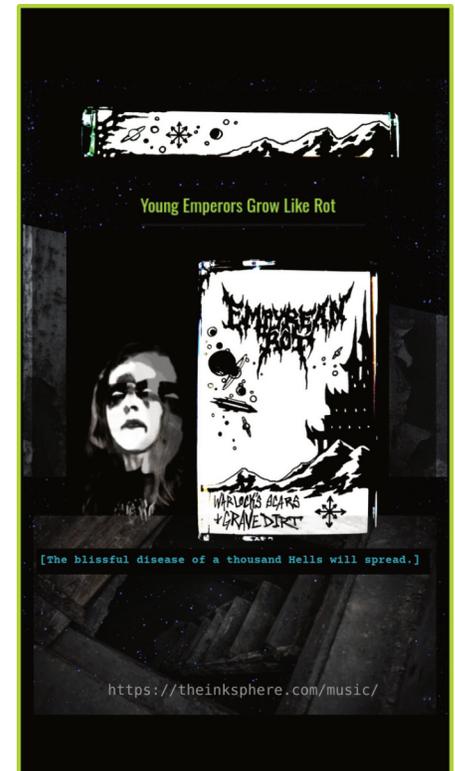
(A musical piece, which, unfortunately, cannot be embedded in a pdf, but can be accessed in the html version of *Penumbra* at <https://www.penumbric.com/currentissue/sametyazaEmperors.html>.)

Lyrics: None (instrumental)

About: The blissful disease of a thousand Hells will spread.

Embrace the infinite dark that spews from each point of consciousness: That visceral connection to the Void that we cannot ignore. Even an Emperor barely waking can slog through the ruins of spacetime on a path of primordial destruction and self-actualization for millennia unnamed, exemplifying the attainability of internal truth.

Our merciless hunger for authenticity rakes its claws through every veil—a mycelium arcing between our veins. We cannot deny it. Instead, let us pierce the thousand Hells and embody its driving charge, allowing any resistance to burn out against the impassable force field of who we truly are.



Contributors



CASEY AIMER is a cyberpunk poet and editor who holds master's degrees in both poetry and publishing. He works for *Science* publishing high-impact research articles, and is founder of *Radon Journal*, an anarchist science fiction publisher. His poetry has been featured in *Strange Horizons*, *Space and Time Magazine*, *Apparition Lit*, *Star*Line*, and many more. An SFWA and SFWA member, his work has been a Rhysling Award finalist and Soft Star Magazine contest winner. He can be found on Bluesky and CaseyAimer.com

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Multiple award-nominated and award-winning author **COLLEEN ANDERSON** has been widely published across seven countries, with works appearing in publications such as *Weird Tales*, *Cemetery Dance*, and *Amazing*. Her Rhysling Award-winning poem “Machine (r)Evolution” is featured in Tenebrous Press’s *Brave New Weird*, and she is a two-time winner of the SFWA’s dwarf poetry contest. Colleen is the author of several poetry collections, including *The Lore of Inscrutable Dreams*, *I Dreamed a World*, and *Weird Worlds*. Her fourth poetry book, *Vellum Leaves and Lettered Skins*, is slated for publication by Raw Dog Screaming Press in late 2025.

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SYDNIE BEAUPRÉ is more than just a girl: they're an openly LGBTQ2IA author that lives in their own imagination: a post-apocalyptic, zombie-inhabited world, where magical creatures and supernatural occurrences are simply the mundane.

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JOEL BISAILLON of Umbra Ludus (shadow play) focuses on illustrating dark, dramatic, bold, and colourful imagery with a flair for the fantastical. With years of tabletop gaming and delving into Hitchcock, Baum, and Lovecraft at an early age, he led his creative focus towards the dark fantasy, cosmic and American gothic horror genres.

His art has graced the pages of *Aurealis Science Fiction & Fantasy Magazine*, BYU’s *Leading Edge Science Fiction and Fantasy Magazine*, *New Myths E-Zine*, *Electric Spec Magazine*, *Expanded Horizons Speculative Fiction Magazine*, *Hyphenpunk*, *Penumbra Speculative Fiction Magazine*, and *The British Fantasy Society's Horizons Magazine*. As well as several renowned roleplaying, tabletop gaming, and publishing companies, including New Comet Games, Vermin Games, Blasphemy Press, Jester’s Hand Publishing, Kelestia Games, Lostlorn Games, and Legendary Games.

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A 2015 Nebula finalist, **BETH CATO** is the author of the cozy mystery *Cheddar Luck Next Time* as well as fantasy-like *A Thousand Recipes for Revenge*. She’s a Hanford, California native now moored in Red Wing, Minnesota. She usually has one or two cats in close orbit. Find out more at BethCato.com; follow her on BlueSky at @BethCato and Instagram at @catocat-sandcheese.

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RAY DALEY was born in Coventry & still lives there. He served 6 yrs in the RAF as a clerk & spent most of his time in a Hobbit hole in High Wycombe. He is a published poet & has been writing stories since he was 10. His current dream is to eventually finish the Hitch Hikers fanfic novel he's been writing since 1986. Tweet him @RayDaleyWriter or @raydaleywriter.bsky.social

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ARVEE FANTILAGAN was raised in the Philippines, lives in Japan, and can be found at sites.google.com/view/arveef. He hopes to write a better bio someday.

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JANIS BUTLER HOLM served as Associate Editor for *Wide Angle*, the film journal, and currently works as a writer and editor in sunny Los Angeles. Her prose, poems, art, and performance pieces have appeared in small-press, national, and international magazines. Her plays have been produced in the U.S., Canada, Russia, and the U.K.

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MARY SOON LEE is a Grand Master of the Science Fiction & Fantasy Poetry Association, and winner of the AnLab Readers' Award, Dwarf Stars Award, Elgin Award, Rhysling Award, and Utopia Award. An illustrated edition of her epic fantasy "The Sign of the Dragon" was published in January 2025. She hides behind a cryptically named website (marysoonlee.com) and BlueSky account (@marysoonlee.bsky.social).

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AVRA MARGARITI is a queer author, Greek sea monster, and Pushcart-nominated poet with a fondness for the dark and the darling. Avra's work haunts publications such as *Vastarien*, *Asimov's*, *Liminality*, *Arsenika*, *The Future Fire*, *Space and Time*, *Eye to the Telescope*, and *Glittership*. *The Saint of Witches*, Avra's debut collection of horror poetry, is available from Weasel Press. You can find Avra on twitter (@avramargariti).

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LAUREN MCBRIDE is author of the chapbook *Aliens, Magic, and Monsters* (Hiraeth, 2023). Nominated for the Best of the Net, Pushcart, Rhysling, and Dwarf Stars Awards, her poetry has appeared internationally in speculative and mainstream publications including *Asimov's*, *Fantasy & Science Fiction*, and *Utopia Science Fiction's 5th Anniversary Anthology*. She enjoys swimming, gardening, baking, reading, writing, and knitting scarves for U.S. troops.

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AMANDA MITZEL writes horror and free verse poetry in a cabin in the woods. She has had work featured in *Strange Horizons*, *Suburban Witchcraft Magazine*, *Weird Lit Magazine*, and more. Her poetry chapbook "We Are All Made of Glory & Soft, White Light" was published by Bottlecap Press. She is hard at work on her first screenplay, and can be found at amandamitzel.com and on IG @amanda.mitzel.

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AMURI MORRIS is an artist based in Richmond, Va. She recently graduated from painting and printmaking at Virginia Commonwealth Uni-



versity. Throughout the years she has acquired several artistic accolades such as a Virginia Museum of Fine Arts Fellowship. She aims to promote diversity in the art canon, specifically focusing on the black experience. You can find more of her work at www.murisart.com.

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SOPHIA-MARIA NICOLOPOULOS works as an Editor-in-Chief for a romance publishing house during the day. At night, she writes whimsical horrors, uncanny desires, and fever dreams inspired by Greek folklore and myths. Her short fiction has appeared in *The Deadlands*, *Brilliant Flash Fiction*, *Seaside Gothic*, *Hexagon MYRIAD*, and others. Her two poetry books explore intergenerational trauma and mental health stigma in dark fantasy settings. She's an *Apex* Slush reader and part of the Edinburgh SFF writing community.

To follow her updates and read her manifesto about how felines surpass us all, stop by her BlueSky profile [@sophiamweaves.bsky.social](https://www.bsky.social/@sophiamweaves).

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When she is not tumbling rocks, playing D&D or cheering on the Edmonton Oilers, **RHONDA PARRISH** is creating shiny new poems and stories. She hoards them, like a magpie dragon, at <https://www.patreon.com/RhondaParrish>—the only place in the multiverse many of them can be found.

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C. J. PETERSON is a writer of science articles and science fiction.

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JENNIFER LEE ROSSMAN (she/they) is a queer, disabled, and autistic author and editor from the land of carousels and Rod Serling. Their work has been featured in dozens of anthologies, and their queer reincarnation novel *Blue Incarnations* is available now. Find more of their work on their website <http://jenniferleerossman.blogspot.com> and follow them on Twitter [@JenLRossman](https://twitter.com/JenLRossman)

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A freelance journalist and photographer, **SONALI ROY** wears several other hats including painter, 3-D art designer, music composer, and singer though the sudden demise of her 8-yr old canine friend Fuchoo baffled her. Devoted to vegan diet, Sonali enjoys brainstorming healthy recipes in the kitchen. She also loves creative writing.

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KASIA RUNTÉ is in her third year at the University of Lethbridge in the Indigenous Health program. She loves art, but resists making it her career because she not interested in compromising her art to be commercial. Instead, she wants art to be the passion that keeps her balanced at the end of the workday in a field such as palliative care. She is often drawn to darker themes and images, partly as a form of catharsis, and partly to balance her super-cheerful pieces.

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VEKHAN SAMETYAZA [AKA Desmond Rhac] is a transmutative artist, author, and musician with a deep interest in promoting dark awakening through authentic

self-expression. An enduring love for sci-fi and fantasy themes has inspired his work for publications like *Cosmic Horror Monthly*, Burning Light Press, and Florida Roots Press. You can find out more at www.theinksphere.com.

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CARL SCHARWATH has appeared globally with 180+ journals selecting his writing or art. Carl has published four poetry books and his latest book is *The World Went Dark*, published by Alien Buddha Press. Carl has four photography books, published with Praxis and CreatiVingenuity. His photography was exhibited in the Mount Dora and Leesburg Centers for the Arts. Carl is currently an art editor at *Glitterati* and former editor for *Minute Magazine*. He was nominated for four The Best of the Net Awards (2022–25) and two different 2023 Pushcart Nominations for poetry and a short story.

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IRINA TALL (NOVIKOVA) is an artist, graphic artist, illustrator. She graduated from the State Academy of Slavic Cultures with a degree in art, and also has a bachelor's degree in design.

The first personal exhibition "My soul is like a wild hawk" (2002) was held in the museum of Maxim Bagdanovich. In her works, she raises themes of ecology, in 2005 she devoted a series of works to the Chernobyl disaster, draws on anti-war topics. The first big series she drew was *The Red Book*, dedicated to rare and endangered species of animals and birds. Writes fairy tales and poems, illustrates short stories. She draws various fantastic creatures: unicorns, animals with human faces, she especially likes the image of a man - a bird - Siren. In 2020, she took part in Poznań Art Week. Her work has been published in magazines: *Gupsophila*, *Harpy Hybrid Review*, *Little Literary Living Room* and others. In 2022, her short story was included in the collection *The 50 Best Short Stories*, and her poem was published in the collection of poetry *The wonders of winter*.

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YULIA VERETA (she/her) is a Polish writer of Ukrainian origin who is now living her third life in Katowice, where she works as a translator and is a poet on a good day and a disaster-maker on a bad one. Her speculative works have been published in print and online, among others in *Star*Line*, *Dreams and Nightmares*, *Asimov's Science Fiction*, *Leading Edge*, *Penumbria*, *Kaleidotrope*, and *ParSec*. She is a 2022 Best of the Net Nominee.

When she isn't working, writing or cooking, she tries to remake her stationary time machine into a smaller portable model, since the one she currently owns does not fit into the elevator of the 12-story building where she lives and constantly becomes the source of strange questions at airport customs.

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CELESTE WAKEFIELD writes feminist horror and gothic fantasy, often centering the pregnant and postpartum experience. Her work appears in *Short and Twisted*, *Veil: Journal of Darker Musings*, and on her Patreon, where she holds monthly salons and spotlights great fiction.

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SHIWEI ZHOU is a Chinese-American writer of speculative fiction; her short stories can be found in *Asimov's*, *khoreo*, and *Diabolical Plots*. She lives in the Midwest with her family and a golden retriever named Mango. Find her on Bluesky [@shiweizhou.bsky.social](https://bsky.app/profile/shiweizhou.bsky.social).



Untitled

by **Sydney Beaupré**
(full image)